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THE 3RD ALTERNATIVE

damnengine's Spring Injector, with:

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Tim Pratt
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Gavin Grant
Tim Lees
Jay Caselberg

Ursula Le Guin
Robin McKinley

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Clarion West Writers Workshop

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Guest Editorial : Liz Williams

There's a new movement in British genre, so I'm told. Or maybe there isn't. It could be new and radical, but on the other hand, it might not be. It might contain amorphous dichotomies, and it could be political, but perhaps not. It could be completely different from anything that's gone before and an important contribution to the history of the British imaginative tradition, or on the other hand, it might just be the same kind of debate that was lampooned by Dorothy Sayers in 1934. Or it could – oh, fuck it. Bored now. Let's talk about badgers. Or not.

I am actually going to talk about Joan Aiken, who died early at the beginning of 2004. I've been thinking a lot lately about older forms of the genre: the books that comprise a kind of semi-concealed tradition in British imaginative writing, the ones that tend to get relatively little press because they're written for children, or because (whisper this) they're written by middle class women instead of – well, other sorts of people – or because they made a splash at the time and have now been conveniently forgotten about in a unwelcome return to revisionist literary history.

I devoured Aiken's books as a child, at a time when literary hype didn't really happen. My imagination was fuelled by her alternative histories: grim visions of a parallel London, children caught up in the whaling trade, flights into the winter dark, death and loss. Aiken wrote her first novel when she was 16, and a collection of her short stories was published at 18. She was 79 when she died, one hundred books later, and days before her death she submitted her last manuscript to her publisher. Failing to enter Oxford, she worked for the BBC and *Argosy* instead. For me, she exemplifies the writing life.

But Aiken was just one of a succession of writers of young adult fiction who inspired, and continue to inspire, my own work. I still read the novels set in Susan Cooper's creepy folkloric 1970s Britain: women who come smiling and wholesome out of the Dark Age past to betray husbands and children for evil's sake; entities such as the Mari Llwyd conjured out of the fear of forest and water, spectres in the streets . . . Or L.M. Boston's eerie gardens and mansions, filled with ghosts and gorillas and living topiary. Or – just to redress the gender balance – Alan Garner's fantasies, which take an industrial past and blend it into Norse and Celtic mythologies, dealing with hurt and love. These are inherently subversive works. They take and alter political structures, they twist religion into strangeness.

All of this material, to which so many of us are exposed, sometimes gets neglected because it is taken for granted. It's seen as background, and maybe that's its natural role. It is the secret commonwealth of genre. Aiken's work, and those of her slightly later contemporaries, feeds into the fiction of Tanith Lee and Mary Gentle, Philip Pullman and David Almond, and many more. There is nothing new or particularly fashionable about it, but there is all the weird you'd want.

Liz Williams's latest novel is *Nine Layers of Sky* (Bantam Spectra, Autumn 2003; published in the UK by Tor in June).

A Note From the Editor

At the end of 2004 *The 3rd Alternative* will have completed forty issues and its tenth year of publication. So, what are we doing to celebrate?

Well, first of all we're going to confuse you a little bit. You might have noticed that this issue is dated Spring and not, as you expected, Winter; and that it arrived a few weeks later than usual. Don't worry, you haven't missed an issue, and there'll still be four issues this year, we've just moved their publication back a month to better coincide with the seasons: March 1st (Spring), June 1st (Summer), September 1st (Aurumn/Fall), December 1st (Winter). For this year only one artist will be supplying all four cover images: Dennis Sibeijn, otherwise known as damnengine. These images are inspired by the seasons, as is the paper inside these issues, a different colour for each issue.

There's also a very informal gathering at the Anchor pub, Cambridge on April 3rd, from noon till late (some people stay over), and you're all very welcome. We'll organise another in London later this year, so watch this space over the next couple of issues, or keep an eye on the website's discussion forum, where you'll find maps, accommodation details and much else besides.

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Damnengine is Dennis Sibeijn, who was born in 1975 and lives in The Netherlands where he works for a broadcast corporation as an A/V designer. Dennis will also supply the next three cover images, each one related to the season they will appear in.
www.damnengine.net

RODDY WILLIAMS — **IRIDESCENCE**
Roddy studied illustration at The London Institute and Middlesex University. A chequered career includes writing for a Theatre Company, running set-design workshops and writing material for his brother, an alternative comedian.
www.geocities.com/rodwlondn/index.html

VINCENT CHONG — **YOU WILL HEAR . . .**
About two years ago Vincent combined his growing interest in photography with the computer and developed his current style. Having graduated last year with a BA Hons in Graphic Design he now works as a freelance illustrator and designer.
www.vincentchong-art.co.uk

D. CANADA — **MISSION MEMORY**
David (Canada is not his surname) is originally from Londonderry, Northern Ireland. He moved to England a few years ago and now works as a web developer for a national chain of newspapers. He currently lives in Lancashire.
www.rustgirl.com

EDWARD NOON — **RHYTHMS . . .**
Ed graduated in the summer of 2002 with a First Class Honours degree in Graphic Design and Advertising, specialising in Illustration. Visual inspirations include comic books, film noir and the movies of David Lynch.
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PHIL WRIGGLESWORTH — **TERRIBLE ONES**
Phil studied illustration at Bristol/Berlin and will soon be doing post-grad studies at Brighton. He has been working as an illustrator for around a year now. Influences in his work include Russian/Polish poster design and Asian drawing systems.
www.wooillustrations.com

ROB MIDDLETON — **RELICS**
Rob does CD cover art, T-shirt design etc, primarily within the punk/hardcore/metal underground, and is currently working between home and the studio space he has in the Norwich Warehouse artists studios.
http://home.freeuk.net/bonehive

REVIEWS — **60**
Peter Tennant (talk to Pete about his reviews and anything else on his board at www.ttapress.com/discus) reviews some novels, anthologies and collections • Sandy Auden interviews Robin McKinley • Tim Lees rounds up some of the latest graphic novels
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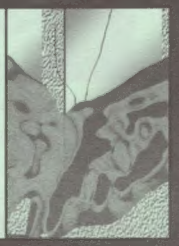

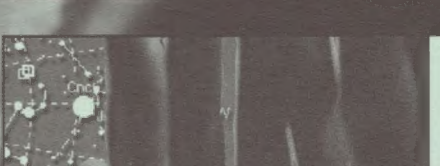

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Iridescence • Jay Caselberg

The fog was up again, adhering to walls, streets and alleyways, cotton-thread tendrils dissipating between sculpted sandstone, glass, sliding across marble building fascias. Justin Kutsenda leaned at the window, fingers tapping a rhythm on the rough stone sill, watching the murk creep below, an expression of wry disapproval on his face. Since the collective effort of will that had wrested the city from its place and sent it skywards, the fog had had its own frequent presence. The city now floated high enough that when the cloud layer was low, it invaded.

Justin turned from the window, his lips pursed. He hated the fog. It dampened sound and vision, sucking clarity away as if it wanted to absorb even the memory of who they were. Hopefully, the butterflies would not be back again today, though they had been appearing more frequently of late, like some misplaced reminder of what life had been like before. Their metallic blue wings caught the light, flashing neon sparks high between the mud-yellow buildings, but in the fog, they were pale blue-grey ghosts, an almost-seen presence haunting the edges of perception. Uncanny. Uncanny and out of true context.

He wondered briefly if Janessa had been watching the fog. She could spend hours just staring, tracking the internal flows and eddies as they shaped and reshaped, smudges of darker grey on a flat expanse of pale shadow. She could see things there, things that remained hidden from Justin, but then Janessa could see lots of things that escaped him, even in their relationship, even in him.

Janessa seemed totally happy with their existence, here in their floating city. She seemed to be happy with many of the aspects of their life. Justin was not so sure about what they had together, but lack of contentment was not quite enough to send him on the Long Walk down First Avenue.

He glanced through the window again as he buttoned his shirt. The fog was set in for the day, it seemed, and he gave a short sigh. In a few minutes, he'd have to go out in *that* to meet Janessa. They usually started this, their joint rostered day off, the same way, sitting having breakfast in their favourite coffee house, discussing what they might do with the rest of their free time together. Normally, it would end up back in bed at either of their places, but first there was the breakfast and the rest of the day. He looked forward to the leisurely discussion, watching as the rest of the city's population grumbled to themselves and strode past, buried in the necessities of their workday. It was as if the coffee house was Justin and Janessa's own sealed bubble, shielded from the rush and bustle, sheltered in a tiny backwater of time, the Two J's together. With its rich wood panelling, pinky-orange metal fixtures and warm interior, heady with the aroma of roasted coffee and cinnamon, the regulars entered gratefully, shoulders straightening like a load had just been removed. The Copper Kettle was refuge and they all made the most of it.

Justin eagerly anticipated their unhurried indulgence, the time spent with Janessa. It outweighed having to go out in that damp grey. The Copper Kettle lay only a few blocks away, near enough so that strolling through the semi-blankness didn't get to him too much – just as long as the butterflies weren't there to haunt him.

A quick dab of cologne, a final check around the living room to make sure it was tidy just in case they ended up back here – Janessa was a stickler for neatness – and he was ready. He should have fed the cat, but he didn't have a cat. Nobody had pets since the city had taken to the air. There were just too many problems with the cleaning and care of animals of any sort, but he would have preferred a cat. A cat rather than a dog. He glanced into the kitchen, picturing where its bowl would be. Somebody to keep him company, because they *were* somebody, rather than something. He could almost see the angular face looking up at him, china-blue eyes wide, looking expectantly as he prepared something to eat. Probably just as well. He shook away the thought and headed out the door.

His building had on old-style brass elevator, and he stood rocking on his heels in the stairwell, waiting for it to climb to his floor. The whirr and whine sounded loud in the tiled space, and he winced as he pulled back the concertina door and slid it shut behind him with a crash. The city was a quiet place, normally, apart from these fleeting intrusions. He punched the button for the lobby, checked himself in the mirrors on the way down, practising his smile, tilting his head first one way, then the other, trying to catch the best angle, practising the first words he would say to Janessa. The elevator shuddered to a halt, and he stopped his self-inspection and put his weight against the door to pull it back. Stepping out into the glass and faux-marble lobby, he wrenched the elevator door shut and stopped for a few moments. There was a wooden partitioned area there, where once would have stood a doorman, but nobody bothered with such things any more. There just

ILLUSTRATIONS BY RODDY WILLIAMS

wasn't a need. Nobody had taken the trouble to remove it, so it stood there, untended, a silent reminder of the way things had been before they left it all behind. Instead, cluttering the lobby, were racks of bicycles, new, old, various shapes and sizes.

Looking out onto the street with jaundiced eye, Justin took a deep breath and headed out the main glass doors. The fog was cool, not cold, and only slightly clammy on this morning. Justin shrugged his jacket around himself, and turned towards the Copper Kettle. As much as he disliked the fog, he appreciated the way it dampened the sounds of footsteps upon pavement, of the electrical whirring of the motorised shuttles or the street cleaners. There were no cars here. It could take you two and a half hours to walk from one end of the city to the other, down the main avenues. Otherwise, there were the bicycles or the shuttle.

As he walked unhurriedly towards his meeting with Janessa, he became aware of something tracking him as he walked. He glanced around, peering through to what he could see of the street's other side, slowing his pace, but though there were people about, no one seemed to be matching his step. He gave the slightest shake of his head and continued walking. Half a block further on, and the feeling was back again. This time he stopped, listening. Nothing. He stood there waiting for a few seconds, testing whether his senses were playing tricks with him. Then, there, the slightest motion against his cheek, the barest breath of air and it was gone. He shifted his attention to the air immediately around him. A vague shadow shape flitted through the air, flickering through space. Damn it. He lifted his hand to his cheek. The damned thing had touched him. He rubbed at the spot on his face, then grinding his teeth, started walking again. It was only about a block to the Copper Kettle now. As he quickened his pace, he glanced continually around him, seeking the airborne invader, ready to dance away from another threatened touch.

As he reached the Copper Kettle's doorway, he nearly bowled someone over on his hurry to get inside. Holding his hands up in apology, Justin slipped through the doorway and felt relief washing over him with the familiar warmth and smells, and the gurgling rush of the coffee machine. He'd be okay in here. There was no way the insect flurry could find him inside. He searched the crowd, noting a few familiar regulars, and spied Janessa sitting exactly where he expected her to be, in their usual spot in the large comfortable leather chairs by the window. She sat, leaning forward, her long dark hair trailing over her face on one side and pushed back over her shoulder on the other, her chin on her hand, staring out the window. It was such a familiar picture, he could have hung it on a wall back home. He wound his way between tables and chairs and stood watching her for a couple of seconds, all of his prepared greetings gone completely out of his head.

"Hey," he said finally.

"Hey," she said, pulling her gaze away from the window and looking up at him. "I'd just about given up on you."

"Oh, you should never give up on me, baby," said Justin.

"Hm? Is that a fact?"

"Yeah, well. Sorry." He pointed with his chin at the lingering grey outside. "Seen anything interesting?

"Not really. Not yet. Same old."

He leaned over and lightly ran the backs of his fingers over her cheek, her dark eyes looking up at him, catching the scent of her hair as he did. "So, you want coffee? Pain au chocolat? Juice?"

She nodded – her regular breakfast order – and he headed to the counter. He watched her as he waited for the things to arrive, one by one. Her attention had drifted back to watching the people shadows moving past outside the window. Really, he ought to think about making something more permanent out of their relationship, but he wasn't sure whether he wanted that level of commitment. It suited them both, somehow, to have their own space and their own place. That way they could prepare for being in each other's company. Sometimes you needed the arm's length.

The order arrived and he juggled the tray back to their low table, and then dropped into the high-armed leather armchair opposite her. He busied himself removing cups, glasses and plates and placing them on the table, her pain au chocolat in front of her, his croissant in front of himself, and then putting the tray to one side. Lastly, he placed a simple folded paper napkin down beside each of the plates.

"So, what are you thinking about?" he said, when she took a few moments to notice.

She pulled her gaze back from the window, looking at him, a profoundly serious expression etched across her face, a slight frown creasing her forehead between her brows. It was a moment before she spoke.

"Did you hear about Ben Riley?"

"No, what?"

"No, I didn't think you could have. He took the Long Walk."

"Jesus, *no*," said Justin. Ben Riley of all people. He would never have expected it. He'd counted Ben as at least a friendly acquaintance, if not an actual friend. "Jesus," he said quietly. "When?"

"Yesterday afternoon, we think."

"And Amanda?"

Janessa sighed. "I spoke to her last night. She sort of saw it coming, but there wasn't a lot she could do. It's like any of those things. She kept telling herself that it wouldn't happen. You just don't expect it, do you?"

The air had cleared completely, the sun cresting the buildings' tops having burned away the last of the mist. He could se

Justin shook his head. "How's she doing?"

Janessa shrugged. "As well as can be expected, I guess."

Justin shook his head again. "Jesus."

They sat there picking at their breakfasts in silence after that, hesitating to meet each others eyes. The news had put an effective dampener on half-formed ideas he'd had for the rest of the day. He glanced up at Janessa, but she was seemingly lost in thought, concentrating on her hand as she slowly stirred her coffee, around and around.

He thought about what he should say, picking which of the questions felt right. Clearing his throat to get her attention, he spoke again. "Are there any more details?"

Janessa shook her head without looking up. "No, not really. I'll speak to Amanda over the next couple of days, find out what I can, but that's it for now."

He understood that she didn't want to talk about it any more.

"So, okay, what do you want to do for the rest of the day?"

She looked up slowly. "Well . . . "

Justin said, "I've got a couple of thoughts, but we'll do whatever you want."

Again she hesitated. She placed her spoon down gently beside her cup, and then shook her hair back from her face. "I want to go out to the edge."

The edge was the end of the world. It was that rough boundary marking the city from the sky. If you stood in the middle of First Avenue on a clear day, you could see where the city stopped and sky began. That was the edge.

Justin bit his lip. Than, after a moment's thought, he said, "Yeah, okay. I'm not really sure we should, but okay."

Briefly, Janessa narrowed her eyes and then nodded. "Good."

Justin went back to picking at his croissant, watching her surreptitiously as she stared out the window, a couple of crumbs adhering to the side of her mouth.

Amanda dabbed at her eyes, though the moisture was long gone. She peered blearily into the mirror, her face puffy, clear tracks marring her pale cheeks.

Ben. Her thoughts kept returning to Ben.

She took a deep breath, but it came out as a shuddering sigh. She clutched the handkerchief in her fist and turned away from the mirror. There was no point looking to see if she was presentable now. There was no one here to see her.

What could it have been that made him do it? She couldn't help returning to the thought that it was her own inadequacy. Somehow, she had failed him. She looked around the orderly living room, seeking traces, looking for . . .

He was gone.

Realisation struck her again. Slowly, she collapsed to the polished wood floor, sitting, her knees drawn up and arms clutched around them. For the space of half a dozen breaths, she rocked, gently. Then her face crumpled, and she released her legs and slid back, untidily, one arm out, her head falling to one side, blonde hair rumpled. She let the sobs take her.

"Ben." His name came out as a low uneven moan.

After a time, she took several long, halting breaths and slowly pushed herself to her feet, then ran her fingers through her hair and smoothed it into place. She pressed her teeth into her bottom lip and shook her head faintly.

Not wanting to deal with the empty room any more, she crossed to the window, looking out, down onto the street, down onto the heads and shoulders of people going about their own business. Barely registering the life going on beneath her, she allowed her face to drop forward, letting her forehead rest against the cool glass.

The fog had thinned by the time they left the Copper Kettle. They stood out on the street, watching a couple of bicycles whirr past. One rider rang his bell, though there was no one in his way.

"Good, I'm glad it's clearing," said Janessa, glancing up at the sky. "It will be better if we get a good view. We might be lucky and be able to see all the way to the ground."

Justin wrapped his arms around himself. There was still a chill in the air, and the building's shadow fell across the street.

"Uh-huh," he said. "Well, we'd better get going. It might change later."

Janessa nodded and reached for his hand. "Come on. It's not that cold."

Justin unfolded his arms and let her take his hand and lead him off down First Avenue. As they strolled, he glanced furtively up and behind, just in case.

"Justin . . . " said Janessa.

"What?"

"You know what."

He stopped walking. "What?"

She reached for his hand again. "They're not here. Okay? Let's just walk."

Justin knew that she was right. Janessa was invariably right. Half-grudgingly, he took the proffered fingertips, waving at him encouragingly, and nodding slowly, turned his attention to the street ahead. The glass storefronts looked strangely oily this morning. They caught the reflections of the bustling masses and bent them, painting them with vague muddy-coloured streaks. The new season's fashions were in, mannequins arrayed in a-la-mode sameness, store after store, the passers by half reflected in the glass in front of them. Janessa barely glanced at them. She'd always dictated her own sense of style. More recently, she'd dictated his.

They passed a bike shop, and then a diner. An old man stood on the corner, his bicycle propped against his legs as he looked blankly at the people around him. He was unshaven, white stubble mottling his chin and cheeks, a long dark coat, slightly the worse for wear, trailing around his calves. He scratched at his head, frowned, then lifted the bike and turned it to face the opposite direction. He looked up the street, seemed to come to a decision, then mounted and rode off, weaving unsteadily in and out of the other cyclists.

"Did you see that?" said Justin.

"What, the old man?"

"Yes. What do you think? It's not as if you can get lost in the city."

Janessa didn't look at him as she answered. "No, but we all have those times in our lives. Maybe he'd just forgotten something."

"I guess."

They had passed beyond the shopping district and now passed between tall buildings almost entirely devoted to office space. Glass and metal reception areas fronted the street, boards listing the names of companies in different lettering on an inside wall, or above the uniformed man guarding the empty space. Most of the buildings had couches or chairs placed aesthetically around the lobby, but Justin had never seen anyone sitting in them, ever. It was all about looks. It was just like the fake potted plants that sat in the corners, fake straw in large planters. His office, further up the worker's district, was just the same. He'd be back there tomorrow, taking his own proper place, merging with the aesthetic sensibilities of the corporation, just another furnishing for the corporate image.

Blankness. In a way, that's what it was all about. Blankness. They'd removed themselves from the disorder and strife that lived, no thrived, below. He guessed it was still like that, though it had been some years since they had climbed, bound within their special urban cocoon, to struggle awkwardly into the sky.

The air had cleared completely, the sun cresting the buildings' tops having burned away the last of the mist. He could see right down to the end now, down to the edge. A slight breeze pressed uptown, making sure the last traces were swept away.

As they neared the lower end of First Avenue, the numbers of people thinned. There was nothing much down here, apart from a few low-rise residences belonging mainly to the dock-workers, and the vast open expanse of park. The buildings themselves were faded, tatty, in places in desperate need of repair. There was none of the corporate gloss in evidence further uptown. They huddled closer to the docks on one side. In the park's centre, you could almost forget they were there – almost. The park stretched right to the edge, a smooth flat area, paved over with wide stone blocks, dotted with sandstone benches and statues of the city founders. Right in the middle, stood a bronze statue of a dolphin, a flying child suspended by one hand gripping the animal's dorsal fin. Ragged trails of what Justin presumed were meant to be seaweed streamed out behind it. He had no idea whether it was meant to be a boy or a girl. The gender was somehow hidden by the streaming weed and the weathered bronze. The child had an absolute look of unrestrained glee on its face. He'd stood in front of it, wondering at the incongruity, here in the centre of this stone-clad space, many a time. The ocean was who knew how far away. Once upon a time, there were trees, bushes, grass and flowerbeds here. Not any more. No more the odour of lawn and brightly coloured blooms. No more the scent of freshly turned earth. The smell of earth was one of the things he missed.

They reached the edges of the park and Janessa stopped, closed her eyes and tilted her head slightly back.

"Do you get that?" she said. "That smell?"

There was something on the breeze, which was slightly stronger now, here, closer to the city's edge. Justin tried to identify what it was. It smelled like forest. No matter how long you were removed from them, you didn't forget smells.

"Mmm, yes," he said.

"Come on," she said, opening her eyes. "I want to see over."

Justin didn't like the edge. "You go. I'll wait for you here."

"No, Justin. It's important. I want us to think about it, to think about what's happened. You can do that for me."

He heard the petulance, the unflattering accusation that lay beneath the words, and though it annoyed him, he'd let it go. She was right as much as she was not, and he had no one to blame for it but himself. It was easy, in this, their floating sanctuary to settle back and let life simply flow around you.

He pursed his lips and suppressed a sigh. "Okay, I'll come with you."

She took his hand again and they crossed the park. With every step closer to the edge, Justin could feel the cold growing inside. The wind was definitely stronger now. Just before the edge, a single row of fence posts ran almost completely around the city, threaded with twin taught lines of single-strand wire. As they neared, he could hear the sound. A low humming wail issued from the fence as the wind played across the tightly strung circumference. It was occasionally undercut with a thrumming rattle as the wire vibrated against the holes in the metal posts. Each rattle ran through him, making his breath catch.

Janessa was strolling towards the fence.

"Can we hurry up," he said. The hum was grating in his teeth now, the low moaning wail filling him with a plaintive despair.

Janessa frowned and stopped. "This is important, Justin. I want us to do this properly."

"All right. All right." He lifted a hand, and then slowly lowered it, allowing her to take it again.

As she led him to the fence, he tried to keep his attention on something else. Over to the left jutted the docks where the skyboats came and unloaded provisions. Import day wasn't until next week, and the docks lay empty, extending from the city rim like discoloured metal teeth. Large blocky warehouses sat atop them, faded paint in red-brown, grey and cream. There'd been a river there once. If you looked hard, you could see the old tide marks discolouring the lower spars. Now the river was the open air. They got pretty much what they wanted in the city, flowing in to meet the population's taste. Things were more expensive because of the import duty, but as a major financial centre, full of banks, financiers and brokerages, the city could bear that particular pain.

They were at the fence. Janessa took his hand and placed it on the top wire, then placed her own hand beside it, the skin just touching. The vibration in the wire pulsed beneath his palm.

"Will you look at that," said Janessa, leaning forward against the fence, her voice breathy.

Justin forced himself to focus his attention out beyond the wire, out beyond the city, first into the empty air, the few clouds scudding above them, painting creamy sun-touched streaks across the sky, then down, down, down, into the haze.

Far below, smudged with distance, was an unbroken carpet of trees, mottled with light and dark olive, emerald and jade. Here and there, a patch of yellow ochre broke through. That

explained the forest smell, though how it had reached them up here he didn't know.

"Isn't it lovely?" said Janessa. "If you look really hard, you can almost see the individual trees."

Spread out below like that, their distance was unimaginable. There was no fear of height, because the height didn't make sense. He could reach his hand out and touch – almost.

"Jesus," he breathed. "How could you? How could anyone?"

"I know. It's hard to imagine."

Though there were still those that made the Long Walk, stepping out to plummet to the land below, simple, unthinking, like stones. He had never understood what could force someone to do that. He supposed it was like being trapped inside a burning building. Was it better to launch yourself into empty air, rather than face the consuming flames? The thing was, the city wasn't burning, not even metaphorically. At least you'd see the underside on the way down, the hidden belly of the beast. He'd pictured the trailing cables and spars dangling through the air like some enormous root system. He'd wondered if there might just be some old subway train ensnared in the dangling mess. What a vision to go out with, as it receded, growing smaller and smaller above you.

You were supposed to be dead before you hit. How could they know?

"Jesus, Ben," he said.

"Let's just remember him," said Janessa.

As they stood there in silence, the slight wind stirring their hair about their faces and plucking at their clothes, a dark swathe streamed up in front of Justin's sight. He narrowed his eyes, not quite understanding what he was seeing. The trailing cloud turned and caught the sunlight. Dark grey turned to flashing blue, sparking electric shine along its length.

The uneven track of colour arced out above them, over and behind, heading away from the edge and into the city depths, meandering through the air. Justin caught his breath, covering Janessa's hand and gripping it with his own as he watched them disappear behind the buildings.

"Hey, it's okay," she said, lifting her other hand and holding her palm gently against his cheek. "We're all going to miss him. I know it's hard. I just hope Amanda's going to be okay. She's going to need us."

Later, at his apartment, Justin made them both a drink, and then moved to join Janessa on the couch. He'd placed a dried flower arrangement in the centre of the low glass table before leaving, just in case they wound up back at his place, and he readjusted a couple of the hard brown stems before sitting.

"Listen," he said. "I've been thinking."

"Hmm?"

"About this whole Long Walk thing."

Janessa held her glass cupped between her hands and looked at him with a curious expression. "What do you mean?"

"Well, who's to say? How do we know?"

"I don't understand."

Justin placed his drink down on the table. He wanted his hands. "Well, what I mean is . . . in a place this size, it wouldn't take much simply to disappear. How many people are here? Two million? Three? Say you're tired of a situation, tired of your circumstance, tired of your friends, or your job, or your girlfriend, or – "

"What are you saying, Justin? Are you trying to tell me something?"

He sighed. "No, no, listen. I just don't think there's any evidence for the Long Walk. I mean, have you ever seen it happen? I haven't. It's just one of those things you accept, isn't it?"

Janessa's eyes were slightly narrowed. She looked from his face to his hands, tracking their movement in the air, then back to his face. "You don't have to see it. Christ, Justin, do you actually want to see it? That's just morbid." She shook her head. "And so soon after . . . " She shook her head again and turned her face slightly away. Her hair obscured all of her features from him.

He reached over and gently pushed the dark strands out of the way with his fingertips. "That's not what I'm saying. I just think . . . I don't know what I think." He sighed and stood, starting to pace as he thought about what he was saying. He crossed to the other side of the room and straightened a picture, just slightly. It was of deep blues and greens, somewhere in Africa, showing ocean and coastline and a rugged tree-covered bluff, naked dark chocolate rock on top. The sky was deep, deep blue, behind the outcropping. He stood looking at it for a few moments, then turned, clasping his fingers behind his neck.

"Listen, what I'm saying is this. You'd have to be pretty desperate to take the Long Walk, wouldn't you? I don't know whether people are actually moved to that level of desperation. Well, not people we know."

Janessa was looking at him blankly. She drew her legs up in front of her, clutching her arms around her knees.

He paused, chewing at his bottom lip before continuing, dropping his hands to his sides, holding his hands palm forward. "People could just go away. That's all. We don't even know what's down there, underneath. Take that old guy we saw today. Does he look like someone who lives in a place like this? He can't be the only one. That's just a small part of it. I mean, you could make someone disappear, couldn't you? No one would be any the wiser."

He started pacing again, traversing the entire length of the living room, pausing to look out the windows, then turning and walking back. Janessa tracked him, the frown on her forehead growing deeper.

"Maybe that's what's happening," he said. "Maybe people are just taking themselves away from things, turning up somewhere else with a new life, getting a new job. It's not so easy just to change, here. Things grow stale. Maybe it's both. Maybe people are disappearing on the one hand, or on the other, people are making them disappear."

Janessa slammed her hand down on the couch beside her. "Justin, stop it!"

He turned to face her. "What?"

"Can you hear yourself? I know Ben was a shock. It was a shock to all of us. It doesn't mean you have to rationalise it like this. It's just crazy. Imagine how Amanda's feeling. Spare a couple of thoughts for her, instead of playing stupid what-if games in your head. There's nothing underneath. People don't disappear and pop up somewhere else. It just doesn't happen."

"How do you know there's nothing down there? Where do people like that old guy go? And where did he come from anyway? I don't know if I buy this Long Walk bullshit any more."

"No. I've heard enough. I don't want to talk about it, okay? Finish."

He swallowed back the frustration and nodded. "Okay," he said reluctantly, moving to rejoin her on the couch and reaching for his drink again.

Later, they made love, but it was lacklustre, and they both knew it. Justin spent a long time afterwards, lying on his back, staring at the ceiling with his eyes wide open, several inches of bed separating the pair of them.

He ran his hand gently across the empty expanse of sheet,

calculating the space. No one is an island. But they were all islands here, all of them here, together, an island of humanity.

Janessa met Amanda at the door of the old church, now a wine bar and bistro, a couple of blocks down from her building. Faith had taken a severe blow when the city had taken to the skies. Standard religion just couldn't cope with the miracle that wasn't theirs, though they tried explaining it away – for a while. There was hardly a place of worship left that had not been converted to a more useful function. Janessa liked the place. The stained glass gave a great atmosphere, bathing the inside with low colours, and the place still retained some of the atmosphere of reverence that had existed in its former life, ideal for an intimate conversation.

Amanda was waiting for her just outside, wearing a soft pink cardigan, cream blouse and grey tailored skirt, looking even more fragile and wan than usual. Quite a contrast to Janessa in her jeans and loose-fitting hooded coat. She kept scanning the people who passed on the street, as if looking for someone. Janessa didn't think it was her. She noticed her as she approached and Janessa gave a short wave. She walked up and gave Amanda a kiss on each cheek.

"How are you doing?" she said, reaching out to gently rub the top of one of Amanda's arms.

Amanda shrugged. Her expression was bleak. "Is Justin not with you?"

"No," Janessa said. "I didn't want him to come. I thought it would be better with just the two of us."

Amanda nodded and allowed Janessa to lead her inside, one hand beneath her arm. "Let's get a table, then I'll get us some drinks and we can talk."

Inside, the place was half full. Long, dark, polished wooden tables were set with benches on either side, pewter candle holders in the table's centre, dripping with solidified trails of the thick beeswax candles that graced each one. It gave the feeling of an old monastery or something similar. It was early enough that the candles remained unlit, enough rich blue and red light streaming through the windows. Janessa spied a table off in one corner, one of the smaller ones, and led Amanda over in that direction. Amanda slid into the bench closest to the wall and smoothed her skirt. She looked vaguely around the bar, barely registering the other customers.

Janessa stood, watching her. "White wine okay?" she said.

"Uh-huh."

Janessa didn't like what she was seeing. Just as well she'd arranged to meet her. She headed for the bar, and stood watching Amanda across the room while the barman poured two glasses. She carried them back to the table and slid into the bench opposite her.

"So, really, how are you doing?"

She was toying with a locket around her neck, eyes half-focused in the middle distance. She took a deep breath before answering. "The worst thing is, I can't stop crying."

Janessa reached out and took Amanda's hand. "I know it's hard, but talking about it might help."

Amanda gave a little shake of her head. "It won't change anything," she said.

Janessa released Amanda's hand and reached for her glass. She really didn't know what to say. One of the bar staff, dressed all in black except for a long white apron was wandering from table to table lighting the candles. She sipped at her wine – it tasted strangely metallic – waiting. The scent of beeswax floated up to mix with the crisp acidity of her wine. The barman walked away out of earshot.

"I know it won't change anything, but have you talked to anyone at all?"

Amanda turned her glass around and around on its base, staring down into the wine as if she might find the answer to her problem there. "Who can I talk to?"

"I don't know. Someone at work?

Anybody. You can talk to me – you know that."

Again, Amanda shook her head. "There's no one at work. I haven't been in. I took the two statutory personal days, but I've taken another. I went in to the office briefly, but it was like I wasn't there. Everybody avoided looking at me. I felt like I was invisible. I just couldn't concentrate. The office was worse than the apartment. Much worse. In the end, I just went home."

"But being there on your own isn't good. Do you want me to come and stay for a while?"

Amanda slowly lifted her face to meet Janessa's gaze. Her eyes shone moistly with candlelight. She swallowed and gave the barest nod. Janessa reached across and covered her hand with her own.

"All right. That's settled. Now. Can you talk about it at all? You need to talk about it, Amanda."

"I don't know where to start . . . "

Janessa leaned forward, sliding the candle holder out of the way. "When I spoke to you the other day, you said that you'd suspected it was going to happen. What did you mean?"

She hesitated. "Ben wasn't happy. He kept telling me he wasn't happy. At first I thought it was us, but I don't think it was. You know. Sex is the first thing to go. Our sex was great. It wasn't that. I would have known. He was restless, frustrated. He started shutting himself away, spending more and more time alone. When I asked him about it, he just snapped at me, said that he had thinking to do. I don't know . . . "

Now that she had started, Janessa could see that it was all going to tumble forth. "So what was it – work, money? You

said it wasn't the relationship."

"No. Well, partly. It was work. He told me that there was nothing there for him. Finally he started saying it was here, this place. Just being here. I couldn't understand it." She brushed at her cheek with one hand and shook her head again. "Of course I started to believe that it was us, the relationship. But then it wasn't that. I know it wasn't. I can't help thinking somehow *I* was doing something wrong. I can't help analysing it like that though, looking for someone to blame. Always it comes back to me. I'm the only one to blame. But Ben was right; it's here, this place."

Janessa glanced over at the next table, but the group there was immersed in their own conversation. She turned back to Amanda.

"What do you mean?"

"He wanted me to go with him, you know."

Her eyes welled again and she rubbed her finger up and down, clearing a trail through the moisture on the outside of her glass. The next words were halting. "I couldn't. I was afraid." She looked up at Janessa, seeking something – approval, for Janessa to say it was all right, that she'd done the right thing – but Janessa didn't know what to say to her. Nothing she could say would make it better.

"So you're telling me he told you what he was going to do."

She nodded, chewing at her bottom lip, eyes brimming. She reached beneath the table, withdrew a handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes, then lowered her hands, twisting the handkerchief. Janessa reached over and patted her hand. "It's okay."

"Sorry. At first I didn't understand what he was talking about. He kept talking about transition. How he had to make the change. He said he had to do something for the city, for all of us, to put back some of what he had taken. I didn't understand what it meant. I didn't know what he was talking about."

Her expression crumpled and she buried her face in her hands.

"Jesus, Amanda." Janessa stood and crossed to the other side of the table. She slipped onto the bench beside her and put her arm around her. Her friend turned and buried her face into Janessa's shoulder, her slight body shuddering with sobs. Janessa gently stroked her fine hair, murmuring soothing noises as she looked around the bar, checking to see whether anyone was watching.

"Look," said Janessa. "We'll head back to my place and pick up a few things, and then we'll go to yours. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. Once we get back to your place, we can open a bottle of wine, take it easy. Then you can tell me what you meant by transition. Okay? Does that sound like a plan?"

Amanda nodded meekly while Janessa continued stroking her hair, her lips pursed in thought.

After a moment, Amanda looked up. "What about Justin?" she asked.

"Oh, don't worry about him. It'll do him good to be on his own for a few days."

When Janessa had left, things had been distinctly cool. Justin decided he'd simply give her a day or two to let it pass. Anyway, he had things to do. He had to show her, somehow. The shadow of an idea had been forming since their conversation and he wanted to explore, or at least test it out. He still couldn't believe that everything was as it should be: the myth of the Long Walk – and he was convinced it was a myth – the disappearances, the strange characters he'd seen popping up on First Avenue and other places. There was too much remaining unexplained to leave his suspicion unchecked. He had to show her something. It was like some sort of justification of his own worth.

Janessa had said there was nothing in the underneath. He didn't believe that.

The day after they'd been together, he had gone into the office as usual, spending a wasteland of a day drudging through the figures, his mind on other things. He'd quickly arranged a personal day, no explanations; he just needed a day off.

That morning, he'd donned an old pair of jeans, a warm shirt, and an olive weatherproof short coat with a zip-up front and bands at the cuffs that he could cinch tight if he needed. He hunted through the apartment for a torch, but it was something he'd never thought to acquire. He stood frowning in the centre of the living room, thinking about what else he could use for illumination, but nothing came to mind. At least there was no fog this morning. It would have to do. With a shrug, he left the apartment. He'd deal with whatever he discovered when he needed to. Hopefully there would be enough light filtering through to let him see. If, as he thought, the underneath was not empty, there'd be other light sources anyway.

His first target was an old subway entrance on the corner of Fourth and Eighth. Out on the street, he checked his direction and headed off at a brisk walk. The morning air, still crisp with the evening chill made his breath fog in front of him. An industrial taste overlaid the air, hinting of streets and factories. That was strange. He wondered where it came from. There were no factories here, no industry to speak of. Sunlight was creeping up the end of First Avenue, bathing the edges of the last blocky buildings with orange-yellow light. It caught and reflected in a high up window, flashing briefly, as someone inside moved the window, either opening or closing it; at this distance, he couldn't tell. Slick moisture lay, waiting to evaporate from the roadway's surface.

There were few people about. The day was early. Further up the block, a solitary man pushed a cart in front of him, straining his back. Probably one of the numerous street vendors, trying to get a march on his competitors, more than likely going to set up far uptown in front of the library steps. He'd never thought about it before. Where exactly did these people live? From a side-street, came the sound of an automated cleaner, whirring and scraping along, half guided by its operator. It seemed that these were his only company. As he crossed the street, a black-clad rider appeared out of nowhere, zipping past him with whirring wheels. Justin had to step quickly back out of the way. Watching the rider disappear up the avenue's centre, he shoved his hands into his coat pockets and finished crossing. A faint nervousness was work-

ing in the pit of his stomach, but he felt good about what he was about to do. It had been a while since he'd taken such decisive action, any action, in fact, happy just to coast through the ease of their cushioned environment, letting Janessa guide the shape of their life.

It took about five minutes to reach the old subway entrance. He stared across the barrier, down steps leading into gloom. The sign on the archway above the stairwell had long been painted over. A vague musty scent drifted up to him from the damp depths. Justin ducked beneath the barrier, having to worm past an angled board, and took his first hesitant step down towards the city's underneath. One by one, he stepped down the stairs, holding the handrail, cool and slick beneath his grasp. At the bottom of the stairs, there was a short passage, and at the end, a rusted chain-link gate. An old padlock and chain hung from a square handhold. He stood there looking at it.

Damn! He hadn't thought this through properly at all.

He approached the gate and shook it. The crashing rattle was loud, and he glanced nervously up the stairs. There were no voices raised in query, so he shook it again. The chain was solid. He peered through the wire, trying to see what lay beyond the gate, but an empty passageway leading into shadow was all that was there. Old faded posters and advertising signs, stains and mildew making them incomprehensible, graced both walls. Shreds of paper hung from one or two of them.

He stepped back, staring at the barrier with his fists planted on his hips. What was he going to do now?

The only option was to try the next subway entrance four blocks up. He dusted off his hands and climbed back up the steps.

Again, he walked briskly. More people were out and about now, and he didn't want to draw too much attention to himself, so he kept his head lowered. Once there, he glanced around, checking whether anyone was watching him, then waiting for his opportunity, slipped beneath the barrier. The bottom of these stairs was much the same as the others, except that a pool of scummy water lay to one side. A dead butterfly floated on its side atop the white-streaked surface, one wing darker than the other because of the moisture beneath. He curled his lip and headed towards the passageway.

Another barrier confronted him, but this one was different. Somebody had cut through the metal and folded back one of the mesh panels. The rusted ends of the wire where it had been cut extended towards him like stained and rotting fangs. But he was right. At least someone had been here. This was justification.

Stooping, Justin eased himself through the triangular hole, taking care to avoid the panel's ragged edge. A short corridor led to another staircase, winding down, bilious yellow tiles on the walls, edged with green. The smell of damp and age was stronger here. It was dark, but not too dark; enough light made its way down through the stairwell to be able to see what he was doing. Placing each foot with care, he descended.

At the bottom of the stairs, he paused, letting his eyes adjust to the gloom. A wide flat area, cement-floored, looking slick, green-grey – he couldn't tell whether it was just shiny, or whether the surface was slightly oily – stretched out before him. To one side sat the old ticket booth. Long-disused vending machines lined one wall, their colours dim. A line of turnstiles marked the entrance to the platform, and beyond that, a low roof, stretching out into darkness, thick red-brown metal girders running from floor to ceiling supporting its bulk. He stood listening, but everything seemed still. On the one blank wall, someone had scrawled something in foot-high black letters, arcing across the wall in an incomprehensible testament to their presence.

Realising there was nothing here, he vaulted the barrier and stepped out onto the platform, his footsteps sounding loud in the hard-surfaced space. It was darker here, and he peered along the platform length, either way. He stepped to the edge and looked in both directions. Nothing. He stepped back from the edge and wandered along the platform itself, looking for clues. About halfway along, he found something. A bundled form lay against one wall. He caught his breath, taking one step, two, cautious, leaning down a little, trying to work out what it was. He didn't want to meet some crazy. As he grew nearer, he breathed a sigh of relief and straightened. It was just some old rumpled rotting blanket. Someone had been here, but it looked like it hadn't been for some time.

"What are you doing, Justin?" he said quietly. Was it really that important? He thought about the conversation with Janessa.

Okay. Maybe there was nothing here, but that didn't mean that this was the end of it. It had become a matter of pride now. He had one more thing he wanted to try here. He didn't know whether any of the other entrances might afford such easy access. He'd found his way in, so he was going to make use of it. Thinking, he pushed at the piled blanket with one foot. The humped shape fell to one side and the scent of damp and rotting fabric washed up. Shaking it away, and giving a wordless sound of disgust he turned back to the platform edge.

Crouching at the lip, he turned his head first one way, then the other, then back again. Which way? Narrowing his eyes, he looked again. One of the tunnels seemed vaguely lighter than the other. He looked again, comparing, making sure his eyes weren't playing tricks on him. No, he wasn't imagining it. The tunnel entrance to the left was almost imperceptibly lighter. He ran the locations of the old subway stops through his head, thinking for a moment that it might just be light filtering in from the next access to the street above, but no. The next stop was at least six blocks uptown. It couldn't be that.

He lowered himself down from the platform and started walking towards the tunnel, keeping in the centre of the tracks. The whole city moved above him, awake now, huge and solid, separated by the merest of layers. He felt that weight, that bulk as a presence in the back of his neck and across his shoulders. He imagined that he could almost hear the sounds of footsteps and the whirring of bicycle tires above him. He glanced up at the ceiling nervously and licked his lips. Perhaps it would have been better to try and convince Janessa to come along with him. Was he stupid, here, alone like this? No, dark-

ness made you imagine things painting fearful impossibilities on the inside of your head. He shut thoughts of what lay above away and picked up his pace.

Justin had to sidle past an old train, four carriages long, on the way. As the silver behemoth had loomed up on him out of the darkness, he had to stifle a moment of panic. When he was close enough to work out what it was, he laughed at himself, but then his thoughts strayed to the detritus of things past that littered their environment, unseen. Despite his suspicions, he couldn't help wondering how long it had been since someone had looked upon the forlorn, empty carriages, lying empty in the tunnelled gloom. Winding unseen passages wormed through the consciousness of all the city's inhabitants. Were they all merely hiding what they had been away in unseen shadow? It was grim thought.

As he emerged from the space beside the obscuring mechanical husk, the light grew distinctly stronger, daubing the tunnel walls with silver. A slight movement in the air stirred against his face. He stopped, listening. Somewhere ahead, almost below the level of perception, he could hear a slight sighing sound. Too long in the tunnels and he could easily be imagining things. He walked slowly forward. Up ahead, the tunnel curved, the light stronger against the left hand wall. He could definitely feel the slightest breeze now, and the air tasted cleaner, fresh. This wasn't what he was expecting to find at all. He wanted to find people, an encampment, or an underground community, not light and air – rude shelters cobbled together from spars and old advertising hoardings. He wanted to hear the noise of conversation, of old unshaven men sitting around in tatty threadbare coats, picking at the remainders of a communal meal. He was starting to suspect he'd find nothing like it.

As he rounded the corner, he stopped in his tracks. A long gash ran the length of the floor in front of him, growing increasingly wider as it extended into the tunnel ahead. It was dark down there. Sticking to the tunnel wall, he followed it, frowning now. The light grew stronger, the breeze more apparent, and it was undercut by the slight susurrus of something in motion. He rounded another corner, and the gash became a chasm, opening into a wide, yawning hole, its walls ragged and rocky. The tunnel walls had disappeared. The tracks had gone. Before him stretched a chasm, wide, open, and empty to the land below. The noise was coming from all around, subtle, but there. He stood at the edge of that precipice, staring down, his breath coming in short gasps. The breeze moved the hairs on his scalp, but Justin was motionless. The shapes of tree-covered hills, green, rolling, looked back at him through the jagged window into the city's underside. He stood transfixed.

His attention finally came back to the hole itself. The walls, strewn with cracks were in vague motion. That was where the sound was coming from. He got down on his hands and knees, easing himself forward and looking out over the edge. Something was crawling over the rocky surface, darker patches against the brown. As he watched, a piece of the shadow broke away and fell towards the waiting ground. For just a moment, Justin thought that a large, flat flake of the rock itself had broken off, that the city was falling apart, slowly, from the underneath. The shadow emerged into open air and resolved itself into myriad floating shapes. Direct light caught them, flashing blue, electric, iridescent.

Justin gasped. Butterflies.

Slowly, slowly, he turned his head to look above him at the ceiling of the inverted cave and swallowed, not once, but twice in quick succession. The entire surface was crawling with blue-grey winged forms, moving one over the other, making the slight rustling sound.

Suddenly chill, he turned to look back down into the gaping hole. Now that he had his attention on them, he could see them, thousands upon thousands of them, their wings in perpetual motion as they clung to the walls and crawled over each other.

Janessa and Amanda had talked for hours, and slowly Amanda had opened up, getting past the halting, tear-broken explanations. She spoke of Ben, of the things that he'd told her. Janessa listened, occasionally reaching out to stroke her friend's arm or thigh. In the early hours of the morning, they had reached a joint decision. After a brief couple of hours of sleep, they had woken, sitting, looking at each other hesitantly in the pre-dawn light. Their joint looks had been charged with understanding. Finally, without saying anything, Janessa had slowly nodded. Amanda had returned her gaze, and then she too had nodded, her face somehow set with resolve. Now, truly, they were ready.

Amanda took one last look around her apartment. She glanced at Janessa, hesitating, lingering in the doorway.

"Come on," said Janessa. "Now's as good a time as any. It's a beautiful day out there."

Amanda tore herself from the doorway and slowly closed the front door behind them. Janessa waited, watching as she fumbled with the key.

Amanda turned and looked at her. "Okay, I'm okay."

They took the stairs down to the street in silence. Standing outside the entrance for a few moments, together, they watched the passers by.

"Which way do you want to go?" asked Janessa.

"I don't know, Janessa," she said. "I don't know."

"Listen. This is what you want. I'm here now."

Amanda looked at her and smiled. "Yes, I know. You're right."

Together, they walked to the centre of First Avenue. Janessa reached for Amanda's hand and her friend smiled at her, shyly. They stood there, together, holding hands for a few moments, looking down towards the end, lost in the distance.

Just for a moment, Amanda's face grew serious. "But what about Justin?"

Janessa gave a short laugh. "So much for theories. Oh, don't worry, he'll work things out. He may be a little slow on the uptake sometimes, but I wouldn't say he's stupid. He's just a boy, you know?"

Amanda nodded her understanding.

Janessa glanced up at the clear, pale-blue sky. "It really is

a lovely day, isn't it?"

Together, hand in hand, they started their walk down toward the park, ignoring the occasional curious glance from the people around them.

It took Justin the entire day to process what he'd discovered. His head kept filling with the image of those crawling, living walls, and the flashes of colour superimposed on the green hills below them. He locked himself away in his apartment, nursing a drink and staring into space. He kept running what he was going to say to Janessa over and over in his mind, but the words just wouldn't come out right. It wasn't just admitting that he was wrong – it was the enormity of what he'd seen.

Butterflies.

Thousands upon thousands of them, beating those fragile wings.

When it was finally late enough that she would have had time to get home from work, Justin called. There was no answer. He left it half an hour and tried again.

Maybe she'd gone out for a drink with someone from work.

She'd been talking about Amanda last time he'd seen her. He tried calling there, a little hesitant, considering what had happened, but he needn't have worried. There was no answer there either.

Concerned now, he started to pace. Perhaps she was just trying to teach him a lesson for his stupidity. After the third call, he started to become annoyed. He grabbed his keys and headed out to Janessa's place.

It was dark when he got there. His knocking and calling outside her door brought no response. He sat on the top step in the darkened stairwell, reconciled to waiting.

Later, much later, bored, his backside numb and his legs stiff, worry was starting to overtake his annoyance. He headed out into the night, looking in the local bars and restaurants that he knew Janessa liked.

It was very late when he finally got back to his own apartment. He tried calling again, but still there was no response. A deep unease was starting to work its way into the depths of his abdomen.

That night he barely slept.

At first light, he tried calling again.

He knew he had to go to work, but he was tempted to just forget it. He had to find out what had happened to her. If this was some sort of lesson, it was achieving what it was meant to. Finally, he decided to go into work anyway. He called her apartment from the office three times before giving up. He called her place of work, but the people in the office said they hadn't seen her. She hadn't been in at all for the last two days. No word. No explanation. Nothing.

He slowly ran his hand across his forehead.

"Jesus, Janessa," he said to no one in particular.

Three more times, he called her apartment during the afternoon. Twice more he tried Amanda's.

On the way home, after work, he called in at her building, but there was still no sign of her. The sinking feeling was back, and this time it had tiny chill spines that worked at his insides.

All thought of anything else had dissipated like the fog.

Perhaps she'd be back by the morning.

The following morning, Justin stood by the living room window, staring out at the monolith forms, shining with their metal-clad tops in the sunlight. He felt empty, removed. It was so clean up here, such a contrast to what lay below, but all of it was soulless. A flicker of movement caught his attention from below and he leaned closer to see. A cloud of butterflies moved in the spaces between the buildings, swirling and sparking with flashing shafts of iridescent light. They obscured any movement beneath them. There were so many of them. There seemed to be more of them every day.

There was something about them, something that he couldn't quite put his finger on. For all their obvious beauty, they just didn't belong, and no one had been able to explain satisfactorily what brought them here. None of it made sense to him. There was little vegetation among the stone clad streets, few flowers or plants where they could feed, yet still they came. Justin knew that the city streets and byways couldn't possibly be their native habitat, despite what he'd seen during his excursion to the city's guts. Maybe as they moved over forested land below . . . But no, that just didn't make any sense either.

As he watched, a single winged shape broke from the cloud and fluttered up towards him, its wings shining electric blue. He frowned, tracking its approach. There was no question; it was heading for his window. Still closer it came, and he caught himself holding his breath.

It was outside the window, directly level with his eyes, hanging there in a slight breeze. The barest riffling at the ends of its wings marked the air currents supporting it, but it looked for all the world as if it was just suspended there, almost motionless outside the window, looking in, looking at him, while it floated on nothing. Somehow, it reminded him of a tiny human shape. But it was only a butterfly – a butterfly with electric blue wings, spanning the width of his hand.

Justin swallowed. And in that instant, he knew.

Hesitantly, he lifted his hand and pressed his palm against the cold glass. He swallowed again, fighting against the moisture suddenly threatening at his eyes, threatening to blur what he was seeing. He wanted nothing to cloud the vision.

Nothing. Not now.

Jay is an Australian writer, based in London, with credits including *Interzone* magazine, *The Mammoth Book of Future Cops* (edited by Maxim Jakubowski, for Robinson) and the DAW *ReVisions* anthology. Jay is currently under contract for two novels to Roc Books/NAL: *Wyrmhole* was published in October 2003 and *Metal Sky* will follow later this year. This is his first story for TTA, and he will shortly also make a first appearance in our sister magazine *Crimewave* (issue 8, out soon).

one

Francis Kay woke from dreams that were not uneasy, but exultant, and found himself an insect. He was not surprised, had thought this might happen. Or not thought: hoped, fantasized, and if not for this precise thing, then something like it. He had believed for a while he would learn to control cockroaches by telepathy, that he would master a glistening brown-backed horde of them, and send them clattering to battle for him. Or like in that movie with Vincent Price, he would only be partly transformed, his head become the head of a fly, sprouting obscene black hairs; his bulging, faceted eyes reflecting a thousand screaming faces.

He still wore his former skin like a coat, the skin of who he had been when he was human. Four of his six legs poked through rents in the damp, beige, pimpled, mole-studded, tragic, reeking cape of flesh. At the sight of his ruined, castaway skin he felt a little thrill of ecstasy and thought good riddance to it. He was on his back, and his legs – segmented, and jointed so they bent backwards – wavered helplessly above his body. His legs were armored in curved plates of brilliant metallic green, as shiny as polished chrome, and in the sun that slanted through his bedroom windows, splashes of unwholesome iridescence raced across their surfaces. His appendages ended in curved hooks of hardened black enamel, filigreed with a thousand bladelike hairs.

Francis wasn't all the way awake yet. He feared the moment when his head would clear and it would all be over, his coat of skin buttoned back up, the insect shape gone, nothing more than a particularly intense dream that had persisted for a few minutes after waking. He thought if it turned out he was only imagining it, the disappointment would crack him open, would be too awful to bear. At the very least he would have to skip school.

Then he remembered he had been planning to skip school anyway. Huey Chester had thought Francis was giving him faggot looks in the locker room after gym, when they were both getting undressed. Huey scooped a turd out of the toilet with a lacrosse stick and flung it at Francis to teach him something about staring at other guys, and it was so funny he said it ought to be a new sport. Huey and the other kids argued over what to call it. Dodge-a-shit was one favorite. Long Range Shit Launching was another. Francis had decided right then and there to stay clear of Huey Chester and gym – of the whole school – for a day or two.

Huey had liked Francis once; or not liked him exactly, but enjoyed showing him off to others. He liked Francis to eat bugs for his friends. This was in fourth grade. The summer before, Francis had lived with his grandaunt Reagan, in her trailer over in Tuba City. Reagan smothered crickets in molasses and served them in the afternoon with tea. It was really something, watching them cook. Francis would lean over the gently bubbling pot of molasses with its tarry, awful-sweet reek, and go into a happy kind of trance, watching the slow-motion struggles of the crickets as they drowned. He liked candied crickets, the sweet crunch of them, the oily-grassy taste at the center, and he liked Reagan, and wished he could stay with her forever, but his father came and got him anyway, of course.

So one day at school Francis told Huey about eating crickets, and Huey wanted to see, only they didn't have either molasses or crickets, so Francis caught a cockroach and ate it while it was alive. It was salty and bitter, with a harsh, metallic aftertaste, terrible really. But Huey laughed, and Francis experienced a swell of pride so intense, he couldn't breathe for an instant; like a cricket drowning in molasses, he felt suffocated by sweetness.

After that, Huey gathered his friends for afternoon horror shows in the playground. Francis ate cockroaches they brought him. He crushed a moth with splendid pale green wings into his mouth and munched it slowly; the children quizzed him as to what he was feeling, how it tasted. "Hungry," he told them in answer to the first question. "Like someone's lawn," he said in answer to the second. He poured honey to attract ants and inhaled them out of the gleaming lump of amber with a straw. The ants went *phut-phut-phut* on their way up through the plastic tube. Groans rose from his audience, and he beamed, intoxicated by his newfound celebrity.

Only he had never been famous before, and he misjudged what his fans would tolerate and what they wouldn't. On a different afternoon, he captured flies swarming around a calcified pile of dogshit, inhaling them by the handful. Again he was delighted by the moans of those who gathered to watch. But flies off dogshit were somehow different than honey-coated ants. The latter was comically gruesome. The former was pathologically disturbing. After that they started calling him the shiteater and the dung beetle. One day someone planted a dead rat in his lunchbox. In biology, Huey and his friends pelted him with half-dissected salamanders, while Mr Krause was out of the room.

Francis let his gaze drift across his ceiling. Strips of flypaper, curling in the heat, drifted about in the breeze made by the humming, elderly fan in the corner. He lived alone with his father, and his father's girlfriend, in the rooms behind the filling station. His windows looked down through sage and brush, into a culvert mounded with garbage, the back end of the town dump. On the other side of the culvert was a low rise, and beyond that, the painted red flats, where on some nights they still lit The Bomb. He had seen it once – The Bomb. It was when he was eight. He came awake to the wind rushing against the back of the gas station, tumbleweeds flying through the air. He stood on his bed, to peer through one of the windows high in the wall, saw the sun rising in the west at two in the morning, a gassy ball of blood-colored neon light, boiling up into the sky on a slender column of smoke. He watched until he felt a transcendent pain flaring at the back of his eyeballs.

He wondered if it was late. He didn't have a clock, didn't worry about being places on time anymore. His teachers rarely

You Will Hear the Locust Sing by Joe Hill

noticed if he was in classes, or when he entered the room. He listened for some sound of the world beyond his room, and heard the television, which meant Ella was awake. Ella was his father's mountainous girlfriend, a woman with fat legs and varicose veins, who spent the entire day on the couch.

He was hungry, he would have to get up soon. It came to him then that he was still an insect, a realization that surprised and galvanized him. His old skin had slid down off his arms and hung in a rubbery mass from his – what were they, shoulders? – anyway, lay beneath him like a wrinkled sheet of some stretchy synthetic material. He wanted to flip over, get down on the floor, and have a look at the old skin. He wondered if he could find his face somewhere in all that, a shriveled mask with holes where his eyes had been. He tried to reach for the wall, meaning to use it to turn himself. But his movements were uncoordinated, and his legs jerked and twitched in every direction except the one he wanted. As he struggled with his limbs, he felt a gaseous pressure building in his lower abdomen. He tried to sit up, and at that instant, the pressure blew out his rear end, with a hard hissing sound, like all the air going out of a tire at once: *paffff*. He felt an unnatural warmth around his back legs, and glanced down in time to see a rippling distortion pass through the air, like heat rising off a distant, sun-struck road.

This was funny. A monster insect fart; or maybe a monster insect bowel movement. He wasn't sure, but he thought he felt wetness down there. He shivered with laughter, and for the first time became aware of some impossibly thin, impossibly hard plates, trapped between the curve of his back and the bunched-up lumps of his former flesh. He considered what they might be. They were a part of him, and it felt as if he might be able to move them about like his arms, only they weren't arms.

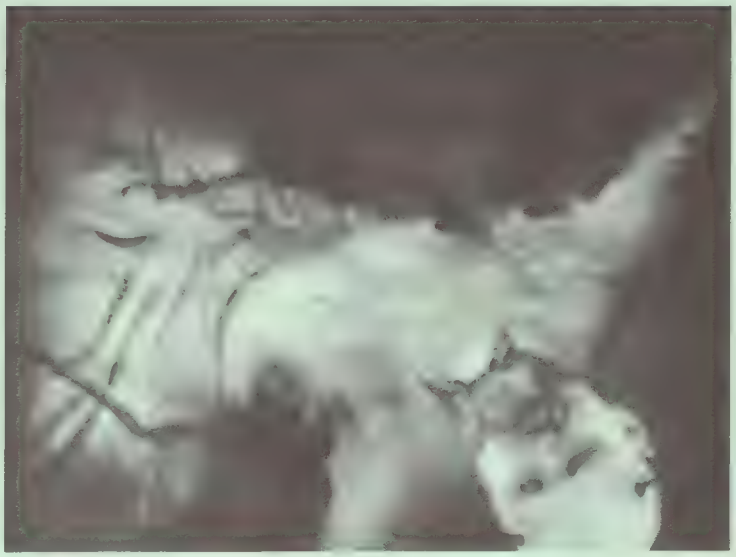
He wondered if anyone would check on him, imagined Ella rapping on the door, then sticking her head in . . . and how she would scream, mouth falling open so wide it would make four double chins, her piggy close-set eyes shiny with terror. But no; Ella wouldn't check. It was too much trouble for her to get off the couch. For a while he daydreamed about marching out of his room on all six legs, walking straight past her, and how she would shriek and cringe. Was it possible she might die of a heart attack? He imagined her cries becoming choked, the skin under her pancake make-up turning an unpleasant cast of gray, her eyelids fluttering and the eyes themselves rolling back to show the glistening whites.

He found he could hump his way along by heaving his whole body up and to the side, moving in little increments towards the edge of the cot. As he twitched closer to the edge, he tried to imagine what he would do *after* giving Ella the heart attack. He envisioned letting himself out into the hot glare of the Arizona morning, scrabbling right down the middle of the highway. He could see it already: cars swerving to avoid hitting him, horns blaring, the shrill whine of tires, people driving their pick-ups into telephone poles, hillbillies screaming, *what the fuck is that thing*, then grabbing for their shotguns on the rifle rack . . . on second thought, maybe it would be better to stay off the highway.

He wanted to make his way over to Eric Hickman's house, scuttle into the basement and wait for him there. Eric was a scrawny seventeen-year-old with a skin disorder that had caused dozens of moles to erupt on his face, most of them sprouting bunches of wiry pubic hair; he also had a filmy black mustache, growing thick at the corners of his mouth, like the whiskers of a catfish. He was for this reason known around school as the cuntfish. Eric and Francis met for movies sometimes. They had seen the Vincent Price picture, *The Fly*, together; also *Them!*, twice. Eric loved *Them!*, he was going to wet himself when he saw what had happened. Eric was smart – he had read everything Mickey Spillane had ever written – and they could make plans about what to do next. Also maybe Eric would get him something to eat. Francis wanted something sweet. Ding-Dongs. Twinkies. His stomach rumbled dangerously.

In the next moment, Francis heard – no, *sensed* – his father entering the living room. Each step Buddy Kay took set off a subtle vibration Francis could feel in the iron frame of his cot, and humming in the dry hot air around his head. The stucco walls of the filling station were relatively thick, and absorbed sounds well. He had never before been able to clearly hear a conversation going on in the next room. Now, though, he *felt*, rather than heard, what Ella was saying and how his father answered her; felt their voices as a series of low reverberations, which stirred the exquisitely sensitive antennae at the top of his head. Their voices were distorted, and deeper than normal – as if their conversation were taking place underwater – but perfectly understandable.

She said, "You know he never went to school."



Metamorphosis Sequence by Vincent Chong

"What are you talking about?" Buddy asked.

"He never went to school is what. He's been in there all mornin'."

"Is he awake?"

"I don't know."

"Din't you look?"

"You know I don't like to put no weight on my laig."

"You fuckin' lazy cow," his father said, and began to stride towards Francis's door. Each step sent another shivering jolt of pleasure and alarm through Francis's antennae.

By then, Francis had reached the edge of the bed. The skin of his old body, however, hadn't come along with him, and lay in a knotted mess in the center of the mattress, a boneless canoe filled with blood. Francis balanced on the iron rail that ran along the outside of his cot. He tried to shuffle another inch or two closer to the side, not sure yet how to get down and turned over. His old skin yanked at his limbs, the weight of it pulling him back. He heard his father's footheels ringing on the other side of the door, and he heaved himself forward, alarmed at the thought of being found helpless on his back. His father might not recognize him and go for the gun – which was on the wall in the living room, only a few steps away – and blow open his segmented belly in a whitish-green gush of bug innards.

When Francis threw himself at the edge of the bed, the rags of his old flesh came apart, with a ripping sound like someone tearing a bedsheet; he fell; flipped at the same time; and landed with a springy lightness on all six feet, with a grace he had never known in his days as a human.

His back was to the bedroom door. He didn't have time to think, and for that reason, perhaps, his legs did just what they were supposed to. He spun around, his rear legs running to the right while his front legs scrabbled to the left, turning the low narrow five-foot length of him. He felt the microthin plates or shields on his back flutter strangely, and had just an instant to wonder again what they were. Then his father was braying at the door.

"What the fuck you doin' in there, you asshole? Get the fuck to school – "

The door banged open. Francis reared back, lifting his front two legs off the floor. His mandibles made a rapid clattering sound, like a fast typist giving a manual typewriter a workout. Buddy hung in the open door, one hand still gripping the doorknob. His gaze fell upon the crouched figure of his transformed son. The color drained from his starved, whiskery face, until he looked like a waxwork of himself.

Then he shrieked, a shrill piercing sound that sent a white electric throb of pure stimulation shooting down Francis's antennae. Francis shrieked himself, although what came out in no way resembled a human cry. It was the sound instead of someone shaking a thin sheet of aluminum, an undulating, inhuman warble.

He looked for a way out. There were windows high in the wall above his bed, but they weren't big enough, just a series of wide slots barely a foot tall. His glance fell upon his bed and held there for a startled instant. He had thrown his sheets off in the night, kicking them to the far end of the mattress. Now they were lathered in some kind of white spittle, and they were *dissolving* in it . . . had liquefied and blackened at the same time, becoming a mass of fizzing organic sludge.

The bed sagged deeply in the center. The castoff raiment of his flesh was there, a one-piece boy costume that had been ripped apart up the middle. He didn't get a look at his face, but he did see one hand, a crinkly flesh-colored glove with nothing in it, fingers curling inwards. The foam that had melted the sheets was trickling down towards his former skin, and where it touched it, the tissue blistered and smoked. Francis remembered farting, and the feeling of liquid trickling between his hind legs.

He had done this somehow.

The air shuddered with a sudden heavy crash. He looked back and saw his father on the floor, his toes pointing outwards. Stared past him into the living room, where Ella was struggling to sit up from the couch. Instead of turning gray and grabbing her chest, she stiffened at the sight of him, her expression going fixed and blank. She had a bottle of Coke in one hand – it wasn't yet ten in the morning – and she sat frozen with it raised halfway to her lips.

"Oh God," she said, in a dazed, but relatively normal tone of voice. "Just look at you."

Coke began to spill out of the bottle, drizzling down her breasts. She didn't notice.

He would have to go, and there was only one way out. He jogged forward, erratically at first – he zagged a little too hard to the right on his way through the doorway and clouted his side, although he barely felt it – and climbed over the body of

his unconscious father. He continued on, squeezing between the couch and the coffee table, aiming himself at the screen door. Ella daintily lifted her feet onto the couch to let him pass. She was whispering to herself now, so softly a person sitting right next to her might not have been aware she was doing it. Francis, however, didn't miss a word, his antennae trembling at every syllable.

"Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth, and they were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any green growth or any tree – " he was at the door now; he paused, listening " – but only those of mankind who have not the seal of God upon their foreheads; they were allowed to torture them for five months, but not to kill them, and their torture was like the torture of a scorpion, when it stings a man. And in those days men will seek death and will not find it; they will long to die, and death flies from them."

He shivered, although he could not have said why; her words stirred and thrilled him. He lifted his front legs to the door and shoved it open, and clambered out into the blinding white heat of the day.

two

The culvert was filled with garbage for half a mile, the combined trash of five towns. Garbage collection was Calliphora's main industry. Two of every five grown men in town had a job in trash; one out of five was in the army's radiological division and stationed at Camp Calliphora, a mile to the north; the other two stayed home to watch television, scratch lottery tickets, and eat the frozen dinners they bought with their food stamps. Francis's father was the rare exception, someone who owned his own business. Buddy called himself an entrepreneur. He had had an idea which he thought might revolutionize the filling station business. It was called self-serve. It meant you let the customer fill his own Goddamn tank, and you charged them just the same as they did at the full-service place.

Down in the culvert, it was difficult to see anything of Calliphora on the shelf of rock above. When Francis peered up the steep incline, he could make out just a single identifiable landmark, the top of the great flagpole in front of his father's gas station. The flag itself was reckoned to be the biggest in the state. It was easily large enough to drape over the cab of an eighteen-wheeler, and too heavy to move even in very strong winds. Francis had seen it rippling only once – in the gales that boomed across Calliphora after they dropped The Bomb.

His father got a lot of army business. Whenever he had to come out of his office for some reason, say to look at someone's overheated Jeep, he usually threw the top half of his fatigues on over his T-shirt. Medals bounced and flashed on the left breast. None of them were his – he had bought them one afternoon at the pawn – but the uniform he had at least come by honestly, in World War II. His father had liked the war. "There isn't any pussy like what you get in a country you just shelled into the dirt," he said one night, lifting a can of Buckhorn as if in a toast, his rheumy eyes glistening with fond memories.

Francis hid in the garbage, squeezing himself into a soft depression between bulging plastic bags, and waited fearfully for police cruisers, listening for the dreadful, thunderous beat of helicopters, his antennae twitching and erect. But there were no cruisers, and there were no helicopters. Once or twice a pick-up came rattling down the dirt round winding between the trash heaps, and he'd squirm desperately backwards, burrowing so far into the garbage that only his antennae stuck out. But that was all. There was little traffic at this end of the dump, which was almost half a mile from the processing center where the real work was done.

Later, he scuttled up onto one of the great mounds of garbage, to make sure he wasn't quietly being encircled. He wasn't, and he didn't remain in the open for long. He didn't like the direct glare of the sun. After only a moment in it, he felt a numbing lassitude creeping over him, as if he had been pumped full of Novocain. In the very back of the dump, though, where the culvert narrowed, he spied a trailer on cement blocks. He climbed down and waddled over to it. He had thought it looked abandoned and it was. The space beneath it was filled with deliciously cool shadows. Climbing under the trailer was as refreshing as a dip into a lake.

He rested. It was Eric Hickman who woke him; not that Francis had been asleep in the literal sense. He had settled instead into a state of intensely felt stillness, in which he knew nothing and yet was completely alert. He heard the scrape and drag of Eric's feet from forty feet away, and lifted his head. Eric was squinting through his glasses in the afternoon sunlight. He was always squinting – to read things, or just when he was thinking hard – a habit which never failed to put a kind of simian grimace on his face. It was such an unpleasant expression, it just naturally made other people want to give him something to grimace about.

"Francis," Eric whispered loudly. He carried a grease-spattered brown paper bag that might've contained his lunch, and at the sight Francis felt a sharp twinge of hunger, but he didn't come out.

"Francis, are you down here somewhere?" Eric whisper-shouted one more time before he tracked on out of sight.

Francis had wanted to show himself, but couldn't. What had stopped him was the idea that Eric was only there to lure him out in the open. Francis imagined a team of snipers crouched on the hills of garbage, watching the road through their rifle sights for some sign of the giant killer cricket. He held his ground, crouched and tense, monitoring the mounds of trash for movement. He held his breath. A can fell clanking. It was only a crow.

Eventually, he had to admit he had let anxiety get the better of him. Eric had come alone. This was followed a moment later by the understanding that no one was looking for him, because no one would believe his father when Buddy said what he had seen. If he tried to tell them he had discovered a giant insect in his son's bedroom, crouched beside the eviscerated body of his boy, he'd be lucky not to wind up in the back of a police car, on his way to the psychiatric ward in Tucson. They would not even believe him when he said his son was dead. After all, there was no body, and no discarded skin either. The milky excretion that had bubbled out of Francis's rear would've melted it away.

Only last Halloween, his father had sweated out the DTs in the county jail, and could hardly be considered a credible witness. Ella might back up his story, but her word was worth no more than his, and possibly less. She called the offices of the *Calliphora Happenings*, sometimes as often as once a month, to report seeing clouds that looked like Jesus. She had a whole photo album of clouds she said bore the face of Her Savior. Francis had flipped through it, but was unable to recognize any religious notables, although he was willing to admit there was one cloud that might've been a fat man in a fez.

The local police would be on the lookout for Francis himself, of course, but he wasn't sure how hard they'd actively search. He was eighteen – free to do as he chose - and often missed school without explanation. There were just four law enforcement officers in Calliphora: Sheriff George Walker, and three part-timers. That allowed for only a very limited search party,

and besides, there were other things to do on a pretty, windless day like this one; hassle wetbacks for example, or sit in the speed-trap and wait for teenagers to burn by on their way to Phoenix.

It was getting hard, anyway, to worry much about whether anyone was looking for him. He was daydreaming about Little Debbie snacks again. He could not remember the last time he had been so hungry.

Although the sky was bright and hard, a blue enameled surface, afternoon shadows had eased out across the culvert, as the sun slipped behind the shelf of red rock to the west. He scuttled out from under the trailer, and picked through the litter, stopping at a bag that had split open and spilled its contents. He prodded the leavings with his antennae. Amidst the crushed papers, exploded Styrofoam cups, and balled-up diapers, he discovered a dirt-speckled red lollipop. He bent forward and clumsily took the whole thing into his mouth, bent cardboard stick and all, grasping at it with his mandibles, drool spattering into the dust.

For an instant, the inside of his mouth was filled with an overpowering burst of sugary sweetness, and he felt blood rush to his heart. But an instant later he became conscious of an awful tickling in the thorax, and his throat seemed to close. His stomach lurched. He spat the lollipop out in disgust. It was no better with the half-eaten chicken wings he discovered. The few scraps of meat and fat on the bones tasted rancid and he gagged reflexively.

Bluebottle flies buzzed greedily around the pile of waste. He glared at them resentfully, considered snapping them up. Some bugs ate other bugs – but he didn't know how to catch them with no hands (although he sensed he was quick enough), and he could hardly ease his suffering with a half dozen bluebottles. Headachy and edgy with hunger, he thought of the candied crickets and all the other bugs he had eaten. It was because of them this had happened to him, he supposed, and his mind leaped to the sun rising at two a.m., and the way the wind came at the filling station in superheated blasts, slamming into the building so hard, dust trickled from the ceiling.

Huey Chester's father, Vern, had hit a rabbit in his driveway once, got out and discovered a thing with unnatural pink eyes – four of them. He brought it into town to show it off, but then a biologist, accompanied by a corporal and two privates with machine guns, turned up to claim it, and they paid Vern five hundred dollars to sign a statement agreeing he wouldn't talk about it. Then once, just a week after one of the tests in the desert, a dense, moist fog that smelled horribly of bacon had billowed over the entire town. It was so thick they cancelled school, and closed the supermarket and the post office. Owls flew in the daytime, and low booms and rumbles of thunder sounded at all hours, out in the roiling wet murk. The scientists in the desert were tearing holes through the sky and the earth out there, and maybe the tissue of the universe itself. They set fire to the clouds. For the first time Francis understood clearly that he was a contaminated thing, an aberration to be squashed and covered up, by a corporal with a government checkbook and a briefcase of binding legal documents. It had been hard for him to recognize this at first, perhaps because Francis had *always* felt contaminated, a thing others wanted not to see.

In frustration he shoved himself away from the split bag of garbage, moving without thought. His spring-loaded back legs launched him into the air, and the hardened petals on his back whipped furiously about him. His stomach plunged. The hard-baked, litter-strewn ground bobbed recklessly below him. He waited to fall, but didn't, found himself veering through the air, landing a moment later on one of the massive hills of trash, settling in a spot still in the sunlight. His breath exploded from his body; he didn't even know he had been holding it.

For a moment he balanced there, overcome by a sensation of shock that he felt as an almost painful sensation of pins-and-needles at the tips of his antennae. He had climbed, scrambled, swam – no by Jesus he had flown! – through thirty feet of Arizona air. He didn't consider what had happened for long, was afraid to think it over too closely. He fired himself into the air again. His wings made a buzzing sound that was almost mechanical, and he found himself swooping drunkenly through the sky, over the sea of decomposing disposable goods below. He forgot for a moment that he needed to eat. He forgot that only a few second before he had felt close to hopelessness. He clutched his legs to his armored sides, and with the air rushing in his face, he stared down at the wasteland a hundred feet below, held entranced by the sight of his unlikely shadow skipping across it.

three

After the sun went down, but while a little light remained in the sky, Francis returned home. He had nowhere else to go and he was so hungry. There was Eric's, of course, but to get to his house he would have to cross several streets, and his wings wouldn't carry him high enough not to be seen.

He crouched for a long time in the brush at the back edge of the lot around the filling station. The pumps were switched off, the lights above them turned out, the blinds down across the windows of the front office. His father had never closed the place so early. It was utterly still at this end of Estrella Avenue, and except for the occasional passing truck, there was no sign of life or movement anywhere. He wondered if his father was home, but could not imagine any other possibility. Buddy Kay had nowhere else to go.

Francis staggered, light-headed, across the gravel to the screen door. He lifted himself on his back legs, and peeked into the living room. What he saw there was so unlike anything he had ever seen before, it disorientated him, and he swayed as a sudden weak spell passed over him. His father was sprawled on the couch, turned on his side, his face crushed into Ella's bosom. They seemed to be asleep. Ella clasped Buddy about the shoulders, her plump, ring-covered fingers folded across his back. He was barely on the couch – there wasn't room for him – and it looked as if he might suffocate with his face squashed against her tits like that. Francis could not remember the last time he had seen Buddy and Ella embracing one another, and he had forgotten how small his father seemed in comparison to Ella's bulk. With his face buried in her chest, he resembled a child who has cried himself to sleep against his mother's bosom. They were so old and friendless, so defeated looking even in sleep, and the sight of them that way – two figures huddled together against a sheering wind – gave him a wrenching sensation of regret. His next thought was that his life with them was over. If they woke and saw him, it would be shrieking and fainting again, it would be guns and police.

He despaired, was about to back away from the door and return to the dump, when he saw the bowl on the table, to the right of the door. Ella had made a taco salad. He couldn't see into the bowl, but knew what it was by the smell, he was smelling everything now, the rusty tang of the screen door, the mildew in the shag carpeting, and he could smell salty corn chips, hamburger that had simmered in taco sauce, the peppery zing of salsa. He imagined big flaps of lettuce, soggy with taco juices, and his mouth filled with saliva.

Francis leaned forward, craning his neck for some kind of

look into the bowl. The serrated hooks at the front of his forelegs were already pressed to the screen door, and before he realized what he was doing, the weight of his body had pushed it halfway open. He eased himself inside, casting a furtive glance at his father and Ella. Neither moved.

The spring on the inside of the door was old, and pulled out of shape. When he had slipped through it, the door did not smash shut behind him, but closed with a dry whine, thudding gently against the frame. That soft thud was loud enough to make Francis's heart rear up against the inside of his chest. But his father only seemed to squirm deeper into the wrinkled cleft between Ella's breasts. Francis crept to the side of the table, and bent over the bowl. There was almost nothing left, except for a greasy soup of taco sauces, and a few soggy pieces of romaine sticking to the inside of the dish. He tried to fish one out, but his hands weren't hands anymore. The trowel-like blade at the end of his foreleg rapped against the inside of the bowl, turning it onto its side. He tried to catch it as it went over the edge of the table, but it only deflected off the hook-shaped paw, and fell to the floor with a brittle crack.

Francis dropped low, stiffening. Ella made a muzzy, confused, waking sound behind him. It was followed by a steely snap. He looked back. His father was on his feet, not a yard away. He had been awake even before the bowl fell – Francis saw this immediately – had perhaps been feigning sleep from the beginning. Buddy held the shotgun in one hand, broke open to be loaded, the butt clenched in his armpit. In the other hand was a box of shells. He had been holding the gun all along, had been laying there with it hidden between his body and Ella's.

Buddy's upper lip curled back in a look of wondering disgust. He was missing some teeth, and the ones that were left were blackened and rotting out of his head.

"You fuckin' nasty thing," he said. He thumbed open the box of shells. "I guess they're gonna believe me now."

Ella shifted her weight, pushed herself up to look over the back of the couch, and let out a strangled cry. "Oh my God. Oh my Jesus."

Francis tried to speak. He tried to say no, not to hurt him, that he wouldn't hurt them. But what came out was that sound, like someone furiously shaking a flexible piece of metal.

"Why is it makin' that noise?" Ella cried. She was trying to get to her feet, but was sunk too deeply into the couch, couldn't pry herself out. "Get away from it, Buddy!"

Buddy glanced back at her. "What do you mean, get away? I'm gonna fuckin' blast the thing. I'll show that shithead George Walker . . . stan' there, laughin' at me." His father laughed himself, but his hands were shaking, and shells fell in a clattering shower to the floor. "They're gonna put my picture on the front page of the paper tomorrow mornin'."

His fingers found a shell at last, and he poked it into the shotgun. Francis gave up trying to talk and held his forelegs up in front of him, serrated hooks raised, in a gesture of surrender.

"It's doin' somethin'!" Ella screamed.

"Will you shut the fuck up, you noisy bitch?" Buddy said. "It's just a bug, I don't care how big it is. It doesn't have the faintest fuckin' idea what I'm doin'." He snapped his wrist, and the barrel locked into place.

Francis lunged, meant to shove Buddy back, burst for the door. His right foreleg fell, and the emerald scimitar at the end of it drew a red slash across the length of Buddy's face. The gash started at his right temple, skipped over his eye socket, dashed across the bridge of his nose, jumped the other eye socket, and then ran four inches across his left cheek. Buddy's mouth fell open, so he appeared to be gaping in surprise, a man accused of a shocking thing and at a loss for words. The gun discharged with a stunning boom that sent a white throb of pain down the sensitive wands of Francis's antennae. Some of the spray caught his shoulder in a stinging burst; most of the rest of the shot thumped into the plaster wall behind him. Francis shrieked in terror and pain: another of those distorted, singing-sheet-metal sounds, only urgent and shrill this time. His other hooked leg fell, a hatchet swung with all his weight straight down. It slammed into his father's chest. He felt the impact shiver all the way up into the first joint in his arm.

Francis tried to take it back, to yank his arm out of his father's torso. Instead he pulled him off the floor and into the air. Ella was screaming, clawing at her face with both hands. He swung his arm up and down, trying to shake his father off the scythe at the end of it. Buddy was suddenly boneless, arms and legs flopping uselessly about. The sound of Ella's shrieking was so painful, Francis thought he might pass out from it. He slammed his father against the wall. The filling station shook. This time when he pulled his arm away, Buddy came unpinned. He slid down the wall, hands folded over the puncture wound in his chest. He left a dark smear on the plaster behind him. Francis didn't know what had happened to the gun. Ella knelt on the couch, rocking back and forth, screeching and scratching at her face unconsciously. Francis fell upon her, chopping at her with his bladed hands. It sounded like a team of men driving shovels into wet mud. For several minutes the room was noisy with the sound of furious digging.

four

For a long time after, Francis hid under the table and waited for someone to come and end it. His shoulder throbbed. His pulse was a hard rapid ticking in the throat. No one came.

Later, he scuttled out and squatted over his father. Buddy had slid all the way down the wall so only his head rested against it, his body sprawled across the floor. His father had always been a scrawny, half-starved man, but sitting like he was, with his chin resting against his chest, he suddenly seemed fat and unlike himself, with two chins and loose hanging jowls. Francis found he could cup his head in the curved, edged scoops that served as his hands now – the murder weapons. He couldn't bear to look at what he had done to Ella.

His stomach was upset. The sharp, gassy pressure of the early morning had returned. He wanted to tell someone he was sorry, it was awful, he wished he could take it back, but there was no one to tell, and no one could have understood his new grasshopper voice even if there was. He wanted to sob. He farted instead, and his rear end gushed the foaming white carbolic in a few spasmodic bursts. It spattered against his father's torso, soaking his T-shirt, eating through it with a sputtering hiss. Francis turned Buddy's face this way and that, hoping he would look more like himself from a different angle, but no matter which way Francis turned him, he was always unfamiliar, a stranger.

A smell, like burnt baconfat, caught Francis's attention, and when he glanced down he saw his father's stomach had caved in and become a bowl overbrimming with watery pink chowder; the red bones of his ribs glistened, stringy knots of half-dissolved tissue clinging to them. Francis felt his stomach constrict in painful, desperate hunger. He bent closer to investigate the mess with his antennae; but he couldn't wait any longer, couldn't hold himself back. He swallowed his father's puddled innards in great gulping mouthfuls, his mandibles clicking wetly. Ate him from the outside in, then staggered away, half-drunk, his ears buzzing, his belly aching from fullness. He waddled under the table and rested.

Through the screen door he could see a piece of the highway. In an overstuffed daze, he watched the occasional truck shush past, racing into the desert, headlights skimming along the blacktop, over a small rise, then racing all-heedless out of view. The sight of those headlights gliding effortlessly through the dark brought to mind what it had felt like to soar, climbing into the sky in a great leaping rush.

The thought of whistling through the warm fresh air made him want to breathe some. He swatted through the screen door. He was too full to fly. His belly still hurt. He walked to the middle of the gravel parking lot, tipped his head back, and regarded the night. The milky way was a frothing river of brilliance. He could hear very clearly the crickets in the weeds, the weird Theremin music they made, a plaintive humming that rose and fell, rose and fell. They had always been calling to him, he supposed now.

He walked unafraid up the middle of the highway, waiting for a truck to come, for its headlights to pour over him . . . waited for the shriek of brakes, and the hoarsened, frightened shout. But no traffic passed along the road. He was very full and he went slowly. He wasn't worried about what would happen to him next. He didn't know where he was headed, and didn't care. His shoulder ached just slightly. The shotgun pellets hadn't punctured his armor – of course they couldn't – and had only lightly bruised the flesh beneath.

Once, he and his father had gone to the dump together, with the shotgun, and took turns with it, picking off cans, rats, sea gulls. "Imagine the fuckin' krauts are coming," his father said. Francis didn't know what German soldiers looked like, so he pretended he was shooting the kids at school instead. The memory of that day in the dump made him a little sentimental for his father – they had had some good times together, and Buddy had made a decent meal in the end. Really what else could you ask from a parent?

He found himself behind the school when the first flush of rose was bleeding into the east. He had come there without meaning to, brought perhaps by his memory of the afternoon he went shooting with his father. He studied the long brick edifice, with its rows of small windows, thought what an ugly little hive. Even wasps had it better, built their homes in the high branches of trees, where in the spring they would be hidden in sweet-smelling masses of blossoms, nothing to disturb them except the cool trickle of the breeze.

A car turned into the parking lot, and Francis scuttled to the side of the building, then edged around the corner to stay out of sight. He heard a car door slam. He continued to crawl backwards, then happened to glance down and to the side, and saw the line of windows looking into the basement. The first one he pushed his head against swung in on its forty-year-old hinges, and in a moment he fell through it.

Francis waited in perfect stillness in one corner of the cellar, behind some pipes beaded with icy water, while sunshine rose against the row of windows high up in the wall. First the light was weak and gray, then a delicate shade of lemon, and it lit slowly the basement world around him, revealing a lawnmower, rows of folding metal chairs, stacked cans of paint. For a long time he rested without sleeping, thoughtless but alert, as he had the day before when he took refuge beneath the old trailer in the dump. The sun was shining silver against the eastern facing windows when he heard the first lockers slamming above him, feet tramping across the floors overhead, loud, exuberant voices.

He crossed to the stairs, and clambered up them. As he moved towards the sounds, though, they paradoxically fell away from him, as if he was rising into an envelope of silence. He thought of The Bomb, the red sun boiling off the desert floor at two in the morning, the wind hammering the filling station, then from the smoke came locusts on the earth. As he climbed, he felt a building exuberance of his own, a sudden, intense, thrilling sense of purpose. The door at the top was shut and he didn't know how to open it. He banged one of his hooks against it. The door shook thunderously in its frame. He waited.

At last the door opened. On the other side stood Eric Hickman. Behind him, the hall was thronged with kids, putting things away in their lockers, holding shouted conversations with one another, but it was like watching a movie without sound. A few kids glanced his way, saw him, and went rigid, fixing themselves into frozen, unnatural poses next to their lockers. A sandy-haired girl opened her mouth to scream; she was holding an armful of books, and one by one they slid out of her grasp and crashed noiselessly to the floor.

Eric peered at him through the grease-spotted lenses of his ridiculously thick glasses. He twitched in shock, and lurched back a step, but then his mouth opened in a disbelieving grin.

"Awesome," Eric said. Francis heard him distinctly.

Francis lunged, and snapped through Eric's neck with his mandibles, using them like an oversized pair of hedge-clippers. He killed him first – because he loved him. Eric fell with his legs kicking in a brainless dying jig, and his blood sprayed across the sandy-haired girl who did not move but only stood there screaming. And all the sounds rushed in at once, in a roar of banging lockers, running feet, and cries to God. Francis scrambled forward, propelling himself with the great springs of his back legs, effortlessly knocking people aside, or driving them face-first to the floor. He caught Huey Chester at the end of the hall, trying to run for an exit, and pounded one shovel-blade claw through the small of his back and out the other side, thrust him into the air. Huey slid down along Francis's green armored arm, making choking sounds. His feet went on pedaling comically through the air, as if he were still trying to run.

Francis went back the way he had come, slashing and snapping, although he left the sandy-haired girl, who had dropped to her knees and was praying over her folded hands. He killed four in the hall before he went upstairs. He found six more huddled under the tables in one of the biology labs, and killed them too. Then he thought he would kill the sandy-haired girl after all, but when he went back downstairs she had left.

Francis was tearing pieces off of Huey Chester and eating them when he heard the distorted echo of a bullhorn outside. He leaped onto the wall, and climbed upside down across the ceiling, scrambling to a dusty window. There were army trucks parked on the far side of the street, and soldiers throwing down sandbags. He heard a loud, steely clanking, and the sputter-and-rumble of a massive engine, and glanced up Estrella Avenue. They had a tank too. Well, he thought. They were going to need it.

Francis drove one spear-tipped claw through the window before him, and blades of glass whirled through the air. In the bright, dust-blowing day outside, men began to shout. The tank ground to a stop, and the turret began to turn. Someone was yelling orders through a megaphone. Soldiers were hitting the deck. Francis pitched himself out and up into the sky, his wings whirring with the mechanical sound of wood being fed to a buzzsaw. As he rose above the school, he began to sing.

Joe is a past recipient of the Ray Bradbury Fellowship and the A.E. Coppard Long Fiction Award, and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. His stories have appeared in various magazines, and anthologies such as *Best New Horror* and *The Best of Palace Corbie*. He has recently completed three books: *The Hallowe'en Companion* for children, *The Evil Kites of Dr. Lourdes* for young adults, and *The Briars* for grownups. Joe's favourite movie robot is Gort. He lives in New Hampshire with his wife, three boys, and assorted animals.

THE DODO HAS LANDED BY ALLEN ASHLEY

NOT ALL PROGRESS IS GOOD PROGRESS ACCORDING TO THE DODO

In my previous Dodo, I identified how advertisers and marketing departments are nicking ideas from the independent press. Well, for starters, here's another example. Readers may well have seen that ad which has mock up Victorian small ads for things such as an 'automatic saluting hat' and a device to control unruly handlebar moustaches . . . well, stone me but isn't this simply a steal from *The Heliograph* and similar publications of the Victoriana/steam punk ilk?

That's not what's really wrong with this piece, though. The fault – and this holds true for loads of print and televisual/cinematic adverts these days – is that the product is not at all obvious. There's a little Mini shield buried in bottom right corner and a not very good photomontage with the front wing of the car visible. That's all. The fact is that in a magazine – this one was in *Time Out*, if you're desperately interested – one tends to flick over the pages and some spoof apothecary page isn't going to make you go out and get a new motor. Why should I care? It's a mixture of the old patriot in me, I suppose – I mean, come on, how British is the Mini? The Union flag and clattering down the stone staircases in *The Italian Job* – and I'm residually keen for British Industries to do well. Even if they're owned by Germans. Maybe there's also a touch of unwarranted altruism because I don't want to see people fucking up so badly with their hard-worn efforts. For what it's worth, my feeling is that advertisers should mention the product as soon and as clearly as possible. In the printed media, those Becks beer posters with things like a ripped label (exhibitionist) or smothered in bubble wrap (whatever that one was) were superb because what they showed was a nice cold bottle of beer. Simplicity is brilliance. Or perhaps the green bag . . . with the legend 'Ernest Jones Jewellery' swinging from the guy's arm on the London underground. Mm, bracelets, watches, bling bling, let's me and you mug him when he gets off, shall we?

Yeah, I know, you're going to say: "Ah but we're all so media literate these days and we're living in a post-modern world where we like our irony and like to be teased about the product, we don't want it shoved in our faces." Really? I see you baby, shaking that arse . . . er, what car is that for? It is a car, isn't it, not some body-shaping pantaloon or 'Look you can ski up a mountain whilst wearing this tampax type device'?

To wit, I was doing a bit of musical analysis the other day, specifically around the subject of choruses and hook lines in pop songs. The golden rule is: Get to the chorus within a minute. Even

. . . WITH EVERY NEW MOBY TRACK LICENSED TO ENDORSE SOMETHING OR OTHER. OH WHAT SONG IS HE PLAYING NOW? THAT ONE FOR THE PHONE COMPANY?

better if you can make the hook your first vocal line – legions of examples such as 'The Tide Is High', '(Hey) Mr Tambourine Man' – or the actual opening sound – 'Hey Jude', 'Young Girl'. Now, of course, there are probably millions of songs, many of them fine narrative ballads, without hooks or choruses. There are also works which cleverly bend the rules by delaying the memorable, singalong bit. One of the finest examples is 'Lying Eyes' by The Eagles, which takes fully 1 minute 40 seconds to get to the 'You can't hide' part. Longer still at 1m 42s is the welcome to the 'Hotel California'. Like I've always believed, and applied within my own oeuvre, you've got to know and be able to work with the accepted templates before you can start experimenting with them and pushing back the envelope.

Back in Dodo 2, I decried advertisers use of famous and/or meaningful songs to try and sell their shoddy products. This still goes on, of course, with every new Moby track licensed to endorse something or other. Oh what song is he playing now? That one for the phone company? No, this is the Microsoft theme tune. Nah, it's the prawn sandwich and Australian wine sponsorship tune, ooh I love this one. What is becoming crystal clear in this age of award ceremonies for everything – films, film actors, TV actors, soap actors, stage actors, play actors, injury feigners – is that adverts are taking themselves too seriously. They think they're important works of art in their own right rather than a mere means to an end. The whole situation has been muddied by the increasingly high profile of the Saatchi clan. What with Charles Saatchi walking out with voluptuous Nigella and opening an art gallery rather than simply funding exhibitions and wings . . . well! One needs to remember that this is the clan who almost single-handedly conjured Margaret Thatcher's 1979 election victory and all the years of hurt that engendered by their evocative poster campaign 'Labour Isn't Working'.

I classify myself as an ideas man, always coming up with some new slant on things. I used to be quite friendly with someone who had his own advertising agency and had my personal life taken a slightly different course many years ago I could have made it in the hard world of advertising. But it was the 1980s, I couldn't afford to order tuna and sweetcorn sandwiches on my dole money and I never did learn to say "Yah!" in a mock-stockbroker accent. I could be as rich as Fay 'go to work on an egg' Weldon now. So be it. I'm still available for consultations for the usual fee. So if any of you need a quick soundbite . . .

Which brings me back to my original point. The free London newspaper *Metro* regularly cribs stuff from science journals, so I will quote at will. On 9th October they ran a feature quoting the latest theory about the shape of the universe. "NASA experts said it was 'positively curved'. They described it as like a hall of mirrors endlessly reflecting itself." Hang on, haven't we been here before? Try this: "The Narcissian people of the Southern Delta have a creation myth in which the universe was originally a mirror of unimaginably great size. This mirror carried the property of reflecting *inwards* as, of course, nothing else existed without. Time began when their accident prone god E-ed fractured the mirror into an infinite number of pieces all moving away from each other." Why, that's from a piece of speculative fiction called *The Planet Suite*. And I gave up physics in the third year!

Offers of doctorates and fellowships to the usual address please.

Allen's piece of speculative fiction *The Planet Suite* – slaughtered by SFX but hailed by most as a work of squiffy genius – is available from the publishers of this magazine for £5/$10. Allen welcomes comments on the Dodo on his message board at www.ttapress.com/discus.

hopping, hoping and questing

Ursula K. Le Guin talks to Andrew Hedgecock about hobgoblins, the virtues of the atlatl and modernist dogma

"I accept responsibility for what I write, absolutely, down to every God damned comma. I know where my commas are and why they're there. I know my craft. But that does not mean that I knew what I was doing, where the story was going, as I wrote the story. The critics and academics who think art is a product of intellectual intention, who confuse responsibility with control, are wrong. Ethically and factually wrong."

Ursula Kroeber Le Guin's commentary on the untrammelled energy of the storytelling process ends the first part of our interview. "That's a good strong blast of opinion to end on for the moment," she says.

It isn't the first 'blast' to punctuate our dialogue, and there are others to follow. Le Guin's conversation is reflective, generous and perceptive. But I also sense impatience with woolly ideas and exasperation with sloppily framed assertions. Only to be expected from a writer who has produced SF and fantasy of stylistic clarity, emotional precision and controlled complexity for more than forty years – a writer whose 'tough, clear vision' was characterised by James Cawthorn and Michael Moorcock as 'the kind of magic the genre needs'.

I was introduced to the stories of Ursula K. Le Guin when a school friend loaned me a copy of *A Wizard of Earthsea* in the summer of 1975. I'm able to reconstruct this memory because I know I read the book with my copy of the newly released *Futurama* by Bill Nelson's Be Bop Deluxe playing at full blast in the background. I still associate the storm-racked island of Gont, and the sense of threat as its people prepare for an attack by the Kargad longships, with the plangent guitar on 'Sister Seagull'. Both album and book provided moments of revelation. Nelson had the energy of the glam merchants, but not the embarrassing trousers; and he was a gifted musician with none of the dreary worthiness of the self-indulgent Prog Rock merchants. And the *Earthsea* books represented a total departure from the cardboard characters and plotting-by-numbers of the SF and fantasy books I'd been lugging home from the local library with increasing low expectations.

The thrill I got from coming across their work for the first time is a fading memory, but I still look forward to the prospect of a new piece by Bill Nelson or a book by Le Guin. And, after all these years, I can think of no more powerful symbol of the notion of psychological wholeness than Ged's encounter with his shadow in *A Wizard of Earthsea*.

Le Guin's work includes poetry, criticism, 'mainstream' fiction, works in translation, illustration and stories for children. She is best known, however, for her two monumental story cycles: the fantasies set in the vast archipelago of *Earthsea*, and the complex SF – rich in utopian and anthropological speculation – of the *Ekumenical* or *Hainish* cycle.

The Earthsea cycle begins with the three books that take Ged/Sparrowhawk from impetuous neophyte wizard to an Archmage in control of his awesome power and coming to a deep understanding of the physical and spiritual need for balance. They are *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), *The Tombs of Atuan* (1971), and *The Farthest Shore* (1972).

Ged, like many of Le Guin's characters, is involved in quests for balance and completeness. Does she see this lack of wholeness as a malaise of our era, or a feature of the human condition?

"Oh, la Condition Humaine, sans doute. But I think most people in most eras have to work so damn hard they never have time to notice their life is out of balance or incomplete; they just have to hop and hope. A quest is a privilege, really."

Another memorable feature of the first Earthsea trilogy is its focus on rites of passage. This theme has become a recurring feature in Le Guin's work. Why has it demanded her attention on so many occasions?

"Well, the rite of passage is like being born and dying: we all go through it, it's kind of a generally understandable theme. But it's a good deal easier to write a whole book about than being born or dying is. It has more past, in the one case, and more future, in the other. Also, you can do it more than once, which is convenient for novelists."

After a gap of almost twenty years, Le Guin returned to the archipelago to explore the potential reconciliation of masculine and feminine qualities, the complexity and provisional nature of human perception and the attainment of wisdom. Her additions to the tales of Earthsea were *Tehanu* (1990), *Tales from Earthsea* (2001) and *The Other Wind* (2001).

I ask what draws her back to Earthsea: is the archipelago a location that allows her to tackle particular concerns and obsessions or did she have unfinished business with that place and its stories?

"I suppose I do 'tackle my concerns and obsessions' through my fiction and poems, but writing is so integral to my life that I can only say well, of course, what else could I do? I don't really have any tactics or strategies except my art.

"It took me seventeen years to be able to write the fourth volume of Earthsea, *Tehanu*, since I had to grow and learn and change a whole lot of my thinking to

be able to do it. Where I was when I finished the third volume, I could not go on. I needed what the second wave of feminism gave me, I needed to rethink what fantasy is and who it's for, and all sorts of things. You can't hurry this stuff. So, when at last I could write it, I did, with great joy, a great sense of discovery.

"I thought then that was all I had to write. But I kept getting, as it were, messages from Earthsea: news, glimpses of the past that I hadn't understood – of who and what the dragons were, their relation with humankind, the land of the dead. So the stories, the *Tales from Earthsea*, came as gifts. And then the big gift, *The Other Wind*, the wind that filled my sails and took me where I didn't think I could go."

So Le Guin's stories have an impetus of their own – an impetus that overrides the author's analysis of her world. But many of her readers, myself included, have been provoked to reassess their worldview and political beliefs by *The Dispossessed* and *The Left Hand of Darkness*. The stories of Le Guin and Michael Moorcock had a bigger influence on my anarchist-socialist leanings than the writings of Errico Malatesta or Colin Ward. So what does Le Guin feel are the responsibilities of artists in terms of tackling the question of 'how we live and how we could live?'

"Really, really heavy. But you can't think about all that stuff when you're writing a story."

So was the writing of these books driven by a personal commitment to the values of anarchism and feminism, or were these themes emergent properties of stories that came from other starting points?

"Emergent properties, essentially. 'How do I know what I think till I see what I say?' as the woman in E.M. Forster says. However, I had done a great deal of reading and thinking before I started writing those books. I had, as Gary Snyder says, 'composted a lot of material'."

So does that imply a moral perspective that demands the visionary and enigmatic treatment that characterises Le Guin's work?

"Yes. If my vision is visionary and enigmatic, partly understood and partly not, if I can only see my vision as I put it into words, then my narrative (or poem) is inevitably visionary and/or enigmatic."

And, I ask, is Le Guin also suggesting the scientific, philosophical and sociopolitical speculation of her books are somehow secondary to a desire to entertain?

"Good heavens. No. A storyteller has a story she wants to tell, and what she focuses on is the story and how to tell it. I don't give a damn if it 'entertains' anybody. They can go to Walt Disney if they want to be entertained. I don't give a damn about any kind of speculation. They can go read Kant and Schopenhauer if they want speculations. I am telling a *story*, an act that needs no justification outside itself. It is, of course, an act of community. But that's a different question.

photograph © Marian Wood Kolisch

"I deal with issues only as I can handle them in literary forms. I am an artist, not a philosopher/political scientist/pundit. I write stories, not articles or treatises. What I am going to say is unfashionable and unacceptable, particularly in England, but it is a fact and I make no apology for it at all: I am not fully in control of and do not seek to be fully in control of my stories as I write them. If I know what's going to happen why should I bother to write it? It would bore me. It would bore the reader. What I seek to do is follow the story."

As human knowledge increases, Shelley once suggested, the role of the writer becomes to help us to 'imagine what we know'. So are Le Guin's stories written with the intention of taking her readers on journeys that allow us to transform our knowledge into wisdom?

"I like 'imagine what we know'. Shelley gets so many things right! But what would you honestly think of somebody who said that what she was doing was showing people how to transform knowledge into wisdom? I mean, wouldn't you say, 'Oh, yeah, right, sure, of course you know how to do that, lady . . . '"

Only abandon opinions . . .

If the stories of Earthsea have exerted an irresistible magnetism, so too have the worlds of the Ekumen. The *Ekumenical*, or *Hainish*, stories are crammed with speculation on utopianism, sex, sexual politics, comparative anthropology, power and religion. One novel, *The Word for World is Forest* (1976), is a robust allegory dealing with America's disastrous involvement in Vietnam. The cycle also includes the novels *Rocannon's World* (1966), *Planet of Exile* (1966) and *City of Illusions* (1967), together with two of Le Guin's most acclaimed stories, *The*

Left Hand of Darkness (1969) and *The Dispossessed* (1974). Le Guin picked up the thread of the Ekumen again in 2000, with *The Telling*. Often characterised as an SF allegory of the condition of Tibet under Chinese rule, the story also deals with the need for a balance – balance between the benefits of technological development and the value of traditional wisdom; and balance between materialism and spirituality.

I ask Le Guin what compelled her to re-explore the universe of the Ekumen.

"It was more a case of inertia than compulsion. I had this story I wanted to write, and there was a universe all ready to fit it into. Of course, *The Telling* involved a lot of stuff we never knew before about the fairly-near-future history of Earth – which may not fit in entirely with other things we learned about Earth in other Ekumenical novels . . .

"But is not a foolish consistency the hobgoblin of little minds? With consistency a great mind has simply nothing to do. I looked up that quotation to make sure I had it right, and there was the second part, about a great mind, which I never heard before. I didn't know it was Emerson, either, and I thought it was a bugbear not a hobgoblin. But my mind is nothing if not great."

An interview with Ursula Le Guin provokes as many collateral threads of enquiry as her books. After the interview, I dig out a dictionary of quotations and find the following from Ralph Waldo Emerson's 'Essay on Self-Reliance': 'A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do'. Wonderful – there will be *so* many arguments when I'll need to pull that one out of the hat.

Le Guin's relish for complexity, uncertainty and even inconsistency is writ large in *The Telling*. I ask if her treatment of the quest for balance in terms of technological development and the preservation of traditional wisdom, is inspired by a reaction to the rampant consumerism and untrammelled corporate power of the late 20th/early 21st centuries?

"To some extent, but I was homing in directly on that sort of thing back in *The Dispossessed*. *The Telling* is less political, more satirical."

So is she optimistic we will – at some point – come to enjoy the benefits of technology without the horrors of free market capitalism?

"I see no reason why not. Could I get anthropological for a moment about the word technology? Technology covers all our artifacts. All our artifacts. Not just the fancy new ones. An *atlatl* is a highly refined article of technology perfectly, suited to the needs of its users. It is not 'inferior' to a rifle; it is different. It has its own technical virtues: it doesn't scare off other deer; you don't need iron and lead mines, and iron, lead miners and refiners to make one.

"My bound paper notebook and Pilot VO5 pen are perfected technologies, just as much – in fact more so – as my iBook (which, fond as I am of it, in some respects needs perfecting). When you say 'the benefits of technology' I think you mean the benefits of very high technology, a very high technology that is being constantly refined and enlarged and complicated, drawing constantly and increasingly intensely on natural resources and causing increasingly intense problems of toxic waste. Free market capitalism depends on growth, and so technology must grow even when there is no actual need for it to grow, and no profit in growth except for the money market. No? I really think we could disentangle the tech from the market. It would mean a very much slower pace of technological development. So what? Maybe we'd have time to figure out how to use stuff. There's no reason it would mean falling back to a crude level of technology: though a more equal sharing and wiser use of resources would certainly mean we rich folk – the 'middle class' of Europe and North America – would lose a whole lot of our fancy toys and amenities."

The other key issue of balance tackled in *The Telling* concerns the encounter between arid materialism and religious fundamentalism. I ask Le Guin if she sees the book as a plea for a more liberated kind of spirituality? And does she see the struggle between materialism and fundamentalism as the key ideological battle of the 21st Century?

"I have stated elsewhere that the origin of *The Telling* was in my belated and appalled discovery of what Mao Tsetung did to the Taoist religion in China. In twenty years he pretty well wiped out a religious practice that went back at least two thousand. I wanted to write about that. I couldn't write about China, I don't know China. I had to make up places. And because I didn't want a book that just said 'ooh, look, how horrible, a world where materialistic ideologues are stamping out beautiful ancient mysticism!' Sutty had to come from a world (ours) where fundamentalist ideologues were stamping out beautiful ancient rationality."

Many of Le Guin's stories steer a tricky course between spirituality and rational scepticism. She deals with the complexities of individual and mass consciousness – and issues beyond the apprehension of conscious minds – to dazzling effect. But, I put it to her, she seems deeply suspicious of religious belief.

"Yup. 'Belief' is a word that scares me. The way believers use it, I mean. Why do I have to believe? I can think, can't I? I can feel and see and think. I don't see such a gulf between spirituality and rational scepticism. They coexist perfectly comfortably in many of the minds I most admire.

"One can recognise what is sacred without setting up a system of beliefs about it. Occam's razor: the fewer hypotheses the better. Or as a Taoist put it: 'Only abandon opinions and the great way is quite plain'."

So is she suggesting we need a more informal form of engagement with the numinous?

"Do we need to engage with it, or just notice that we *are* engaged with it?"

Evil being done

The past few years have been a period of apparently prolific output for Ursula Le Guin. I ask what lies behind this flood of stories.

"I've been prolific ever since I was about twenty. I didn't work any harder than usual the last few years. The recent 'flood' was not so much a result of my writing as a result of changing publishers (therefore a hiatus) and the weird holds and rushes in publishers' schedules. There was a gap for a while, like a traffic gap, and then comes the rush. I didn't really want to have four books come out in two years, or five in three years or what ever it's been – but so it was."

Le Guin is now in her eighth decade. Her later fiction explores new facets of the same themes as her earlier work but, for me, there's been a transfer of energy in her writing, with a shift from a baroque, densely symbolic style towards something more elegant, rigorous and reflective. I ask if she is conscious of this apparent change in approach.

"No. Andy, I think it is something that happens as one grows older, it has something to do perhaps with reaching into places one had not reached before – and needing to stretch. If one was elegant and rigorous, one becomes more baroque and densely plotted. Recent stories by A.S. Byatt for example? If one was baroque and densely plotted, one reaches towards austerity, simplicity, freedom . . . ? And I never really did know what a plot was. Never could do it. Faked it."

I ask if there are particular social, political and cultural developments that have led her to reassess the way her writing maps on to the reality she has experienced?

"Oh, man. I am 73. Shall we try to count the 'developments' in the last sixty years? I was becoming a rational being during the Second World War. An odd time to try to become rational. You are 15 years old and your country drops

an atomic bomb on a city full of people who are your *enemies*. So deal with it, kid. The first 'development' that really brought me to political consciousness was one you probably consider very ancient history – 1948 I think – the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia. That one really woke me up. I don't know why. I didn't have anything against Russia, or for Czechoslovakia. I just suddenly became aware of evil being done."

So if these events have somehow seeped into the writing, has the writing, in its turn, influenced the way its author looks at the world?

"Endlessly, constantly; writing is the way I look at the world, if I want to hold on to what I see. Otherwise I just stare and am appalled, or happy, depending on what I'm looking at."

One event that has elicited far more than an appalled stare is the hawkish shift in US foreign policy in recent years. Le Guin protested against US involvement in Vietnam and is a contributor to the current Poets Against the War initiative. How does she feel about the fact that so many people in the US and Britain have learned so little from the experience of thirty years ago?

"I feel sick, scared, and angry, and the recent election in California wasn't a big help, either. If moderate and liberal Americans can't take the government away from these hyper-rightist radicals, my country will not be a democracy by 2006. I don't think you Brits are in anything like the same danger, if that is any consolation. Although Blair made the same mistake the Democratic Party did here. He thought he could cooperate. You do not cooperate with this lot we have in the White House. You either collude, or you reject, back off, save your skins. Vive la France!"

My masters, my loves

An accomplished translator, Le Guin has an academic background in Romance Languages. I ask to what extent her experience of other languages has fed into her work.

"Je n'ai pas le moindre idee, mais j'aimerai toujours Vigny, Georges Sand, Victor Hugo, mes maitres, mes amours. Anche Giacomo Leopardi."

In other words: "I don't have the slightest idea, but I will always love Vigny, Georges Sand, Victor Hugo, my masters, my loves. Also Giacomo Leopardi." [I'm embarrassingly mono-lingual, so thanks to the multitalented Nicholas Royle for translating that phrase from the original French and Italian].

Le Guin has characterised the strand of her writing represented by books such as *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971) as 'psychomyths' – stories in which dreamscapes have the possibility of redefining reality. I ask if there are mythic stories that have had a powerful resonance for the author herself.

"'Coyote and the Shadow People', as told by Archie Phinney which can be found in *Coyote Was Going There* (ed. Jarold Ramsay) and *Retelling/Rereading* by Karl Kroeber. As to why, I can only say read it, and I think you'll see why."

We close the interview by talking about recent developments in fiction for children and young adults. I ask how she feels about the unexamined acclaim that J.K. Rowling is given for renewing the interest of children – particularly boys – in literature.

"If true, hurray for J.K. Rowling!"

But what about the originality attributed to Rowling, and the apparent critical ignorance of complex and engaging work for young people by earlier – and for me more accomplished – fabulists like Le Guin, Diana Wynn Jones and Eva Ibbotson, author of the thoroughly engaging *The Secret of Platform 13*.

"Well, these reviewers mostly don't know a bloody thing about fantasy or children's lit, because they have been proving their validity as Real Grown Up Lit Crits by strictly and ostentatiously ignoring fantasy, young adult, children's books, and all the rest of literature outside their tiny corner of realismo. They are deeply ignorant people."

Le Guin tells me she hasn't come across *The Secret of Platform 13*: "Ay! Ow! I am a deeply ignorant person! I am ashamed! I don't know this book! Please, tell me about it?"

I briefly relate that *Platform 13 of Kings Cross Station* is a portal to a magical island, travelled by a kidnapped infant prince and the gang of mythic misfits trying to rescue him. I go on to ask Le Guin what she considers to be the implication of the wilful critical ignorance she has identified.

"It tells us that the Modernist dogma (Literature is Realism and vice versa) is still controlling the thought processes of many amiable and educable people, who might well take real pleasure from learning what science fiction and fantasy and young adult books and kiddilit and all the other despised and rejected genres are doing, and have been doing for the last century or so, and might write about it, and review it intelligently if . . .

"If Modernist dogma weren't still in charge among the Editors of the Accepted Reviews, and if Corporate Capitalism weren't still in charge of everything, so that the book that makes the most money, the best seller, is the automatic masterpiece. To be replaced, in a week or a month or a year, painlessly and with infinite hullabaloo, by the next automatic masterpiece."

And so we end our discussion with another good strong blast of opinion.

"Hey, this was kind of fun. Cheers!"

It was Sita Dulip who discovered, whilst stuck in the airport, unable to get anywhere, how to change planes – literally. By a mere kind of a twist and a slipping bend, easier to do than describe, she could go anywhere – be anywhere – because she was already between planes . . . and on the way back from her sister's wedding, she missed her plan in Chicago and found herself in Choom.

The author, now armed with this knowledge and Rornan's invaluable Handy Planetary Guide – although not the Encyclopedia Planetaria, as that runs to forty-four volumes – has spent many years exploring places as diverse as Islac and the Veksian plane.

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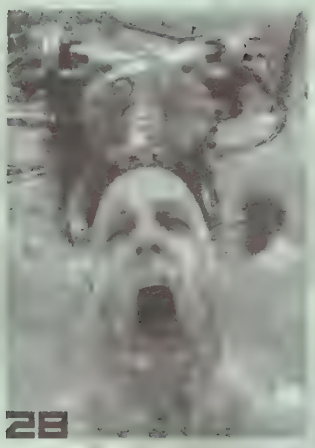
Gollancz hb, 214pp, £8.99



MISSION MEMORY

JONATHAN LISTENED FROM HIS SEAT in the rack ship while the others, charged up from the killing, bellowed around him. Then the ship touched the ground and the rest of them pounded down the ramp ahead of him, almost twenty strong, across the rainy courtyard and into the welcoming light and open door of the barracks building. The stone buildings of the town darkened the steaming pre-dawn horizon beyond.

Trailing behind, he watched as each of the others slapped the plaque above the entryway on the way in.

"Live In The Present!" shouted Ali, first in now as he was after practices, his hand spanking the bronze.

"It's All You've Got!" completed the others, their hands raining blows on the metal as they went by.

They always read the plaque together, re-entering the building after drills. That knowledge, the knowledge of fighting and the plaque and their routines, lived in the how-to part of their minds that Doc was always reminding them about, the part they retained.

The noise of their hands was like a sound-still from the aftermath of the last explosive Jonathan had thrown: the hiss of metallic dust expanding from the epicenter of the blast, then the plop of body parts around him in the night. Just before he had gone in to help the others rip up anybody who was left.

By the time he made it inside, the rest of them had flooded into the main barracks room and begun removing their equipment. Ali stood by his bunk, giving a dramatic, sexual shudder of post-kill ecstasy, and then uttered a yelp of self-congratulation. The others laughed.

Jonathan started hanging his gear next to the wires sticking out of the wall at the head of the bed, reviewing the sensory details of the night's experience in his mind. Doc had told them in the pre-mission briefing that he would expect a coherent narrative, to make sure their observations matched what the hovers had fed back to him. Jonathan, like all of them, would be expected to deliver his piece. But he couldn't seem to get them clear. They were like sparks in his brain, and they hurt: the terrified face of a teenager, a kid his own age, maybe eighteen years old, just before Jonathan shot him; the heat of the flames; the hiss of the metal dust. Body parts, plopping. A woman, screaming: *Leave them, leave them*. And the children, fleeing. What was wrong with him?

Tula interrupted him with a poke and lifted her chin at him, the way she always did when she asked a question. "How you doing?" she said. "You seemed a little off back there."

Jonathan dropped the rest of his gear on his bunk. "Fine," he said. "Fine."

"You're not fine, and you better get fine before storytime."

He sat down and stared at the floor. The pale pattern seemed like something he had imagined in another life and no longer recognized.

Tula took his hand, and he looked down at her black fingers, interlaced with his white ones. He couldn't remember when his sister hadn't been with him – playing games with him back when they were kids, then training with him during the years since, when the family had begun helping make this world, so far from Earth, safe for resource extraction.

The growing years were when they had had continuous time. Training time was how-to and stayed with them. But mission time was different. Mission time was in the part of their brains that kept track of facts. That was where the drugs went.

Had Tula had to help him like this after other missions? No, he thought. Doc would have found out and talked to him about it during regular time, training days. He would remember.

Tula put her arm around him and began rocking him, back and forth, back and forth. Gradually the others realized what was going on and subsided, gathering in a circle around them.

"Problem," said Ali, in a warning voice. "Can't be spoiling it. He's unfit."

"He's one of us," said Petey, and a low murmur went through the group.

Tula rubbed Jonathan's head. "We've probably all been through it," she said. "Times when you think the mission is unusual."

"How would you know?" said Ali.

"Yeah, you got no way of knowing," said Jorge. "All we know is, if he has a problem more than once or twice, the drugs'll start to not take. Doc will make him leave."

"Never," said Tula. "This kid kicks ass as good as any of us. My brother." She cradled Jonathan again. He felt dizzy.

"It happens," said Yvonne, shaking her blonde hair back from her eyes. Blood still covered the backs of her hands and wrists, as if she were wearing red gloves. "I've heard of it. Other units. They lose people."

"You think this happened before, Jonno?" Jorge asked him.

"I don't know," said Jonathan, thinking, *If it did, how did I survive? This is why they invented the drugs in the first place. I should be grateful.*

"Where would you go, Jonathan, you jerk?" said Tula, kneading his neck. "We're the ones that love you. Where would you go if not here?" She shook him affectionately.

He tried not to hyperventilate. Good question, he thought. Where do you go when half your life's missing? "I can't," he said. "I can't forget, not this time. There were kids – kids . . . "

"Of course there were kids," said a booming voice, and everybody fell back, like the sea parting for some god. Tula patted Jonathan and let him go. "There are always kids," Doc said. "And other civilians. Women who don't fight. Old men who can't remember fighting. Sometimes some of them even fight back. Not that we give a shit, do we, children?" He sauntered into the suddenly empty space in front of Jonathan's bunk and walked around it, all facial stubble and gray authority. "Everybody's here," he said. "That's good. Excellent. I like my boys and girls to come back alive, intact. Any injuries? Yvonne, that isn't your blood, is it?"

"No, Doc," she said. "Theirs."

"Good."

"I think I stubbed my toe," said Petey.

Everybody laughed, including Doc. But when the laughter trickled away, he was standing motionless, looking down at them. "Okay," he said. "It's storytime. I want all your stories before you go to bed. The hovers don't catch everything."

He sat on the bunk opposite Jonathan. A rustle ensued, while half the group grabbed stools and scraped them into a circle, and the other half sat on the nearest bunks or curled up on the floor. "Who's first? Ali?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'll go," said Ali. "We touched down on the backside of the ridge and came over in a line – "

"Cut to the chase," Doc said.

"Petey and I, Hack, Chi-chi, Yvonne, we're all north of the village. It's so jungly we got our nights on so we can see, it's like ghostville. I hear Jorge and Atrielle to the right. The mini-hovers are giving me views on my patch, so I can see the others circling to the south. I'm like an animal in the night. I can smell the people."

Jonathan heard Ali's voice from a long way off.

"Then?" demanded Doc.

"I'm behind Jorge and Atrielle," Mina said. "Me and Yakkis and Josie and Tenno. We catch up with the two of them at the edge and I lead us in a line, so we're sprinkled along."

"Jonathan?" said Doc.

Jonathan didn't pick up the narrative. He was staring at the floor again.

"He was with me and Itsy and Bella, and Elsa and Ellen – " the twins nodded – "and we all slipped behind Ali's cluster and circled around eastward," said Tula.

Jonathan could feel Doc watching him.

"Me and Tammy and Luke, we went down the far end," said Booboo. "There was a little canyon there, we thought they might try to slip away."

"And then?" said Doc. Jonathan sensed him move his gaze to someone else.

"So I send the signal through the lines, and we move in," said Ali. "We fire the houses, and they start running out, and we go to work on them."

"How many?"

"Forty-two," said Ali. "That we could count. Cleanup will detail them. They were moving in when we left."

"Special experiences?"

"I cut a guy's dick off," said Tammy promptly.

"You did not," said Booboo. "I was with you the whole time."

"You weren't looking the whole time," said Tammy, but everybody ignored her; she was always making unverifiable claims during regular time.

"I got most of the ones on the east side," said Yvonne.

"I never wasted a single firebug," said Hack. "Got every building the first throw."

"Good for you," said Doc.

"Once we were through into the center, I got most of the adults coming out the buildings. Some of them I just shot, some I used the firegun," said Ali.

"Jonathan?"

"We caught a lot of the kids," said Tula. "They were hard to see, but we got them. We used grenades to get the last ones, just to be sure."

"We?"

There was a second in which Jonathan said nothing, and Tula said, "Yeah, all five of us in our group." Jonathan put his face in his hands. He thought of the body parts, plopping. Himself, struggling to breathe. Tula, half-carrying him to the rack ship.

"Good," Doc said. Jonathan looked up and saw that he was smiling. "And you all kept track of each other. Through the noise, and the screaming, and the confusion, and the sound of the explosives and the ammunition, and the running from here to there. You kept track of each other. That's important. People in families take care of each other." He waited for more, but Jonathan's mood seemed to have affected them all.

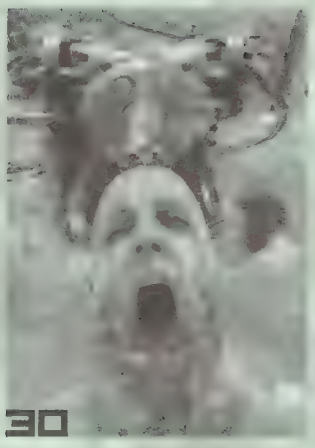
"Pill time, Doc," somebody finally said.

"Pill time," Doc repeated. "Absolutely. But first get yourselves into bed."

They got up and started doing what they did after training: putting the stools away, hanging up the rest of the gear, making their beds neat. Tula gave Jonathan a reassuring shake and thumped him on the back, then went to her own bunk. Just like the others, Jonathan stripped and went into the showers, washing away the blood and dirt and sweat, the leftover smells of burning and hot metal. He couldn't think of any alternative. With everybody else, he heaped his clothes onto the big pile at the door, where the day staff would pick it up for washing. Then, just like everybody else, he lay down on his bunk in his clean underwear, pulled the wires from the wall, and hooked them up to his temples. He stared at the ceiling. *What else can I do?* he thought helplessly.

Doc pulled a pill bottle out of his pocket and began to pace up and down the aisle, shaking it gently. "You, children, are the chosen ones," he said. Jonathan wondered if he made this same speech every time they came back from a mission. "You and your fellow units exemplify a great truth, which is that forgetting is more important than remembering. We human beings cannot move forward without leaving the past behind. And because we know now how to bring forgetting about, you will dispense with what you have seen and done tonight. You will be at peace. Because you will forget, you will be able to do it all again. The peace of the pill makes you effective soldiers. The peace of our family makes you whole. Sleep now, and when you wake, you will be as other young men and women, untouched by the suffering you have caused. Sleep, my children. We have been together lo these many years. We will be together many more. Sleep."

He began going down one side of the room and up the other,



JONATHAN HAD HEARD THAT THERE USED TO BE RELIGIONS ON EARTH WHERE YOU WOULD OPEN YOUR MOUTH AND SOMETHING WOULD BE PUT INTO IT, BUT HE DIDN'T THINK THAT HAPPENED ANYMORE

placing a pill in each of their mouths. Jonathan had heard that there used to be religions on Earth where you would open your mouth and something would be put into it, but he didn't think that happened anymore.

Doc looked at Jonathan for a long time before giving him his. But it seemed he could tell that Jonathan was ready.

Doc had reminded them last night that the pill made you drowsy fast, which was why you had to be lying down when you took it. And that after that, it made you feel good. And that you would then go to sleep, the way Jonathan was doing now. And when you woke up, you would remember nothing about the two days before, or even the week before – they could change the pill if they wanted, to work for that short or that long, or longer. You would lose however much time they wanted you to lose.

Somewhere between storytime and the end of his shower, Jonathan had decided that this night was time he couldn't afford to keep. He suspected some of the others felt the same, even though he was the only one who seemed to be having problems. And even if they didn't, even if the ones like Ali and Tammy enjoyed the missions, it didn't matter. Doc always told them forgetting was a better way. It kept them mentally clean and in control of themselves, he said. And so, the next morning, for all of them, it would be as if this night had never been.

"LOOK AT ALL THIS," SAID PETEY. "Look at it! Sunshine, for once. No barracks. I don't know why they keep us cooped up all the time. We need more R&R, damn it. It's like they don't trust us." He jabbed Jonathan.

"Right," said Jonathan, leaning back next to him in an old-fashioned drinking place in the town square.

Petey was correct about the beautiful day. But something wasn't right. It wasn't the market, the people, the food. Jonathan didn't know what it was. It bothered him. He closed his eyes against the sun for a moment, listening to the water plopping into the fountain in the center of the square. It reminded him of something. Then he opened them. Women with long gray hair were setting up stalls to sell cloth across the way. They were all dressed in long light-brown robes, and their hair fell down in spirals; neither the Quieros in town nor the ones whose settlements were interfering with mining operations believed in prettifying themselves, according to Doc. On arriving, the women had glanced at the young soldiers and talked to each other quietly, then ignored them and got to work. One or two of them still glanced their way occasionally, though. Jonathan wondered if they lived here or had trekked in from one of the illegal settlements. If the latter, they were the kind of people he had killed, whether he remembered doing it or not. His heart began to pound, and he sat up.

"They just don't want us getting in trouble," said Ali. "Sometimes things you forgot doing come up and yell at you in the street. I heard a guy in one of the Southern units had that happen. Scared the crap out of him."

"Who was it?" said Petey.

"A Quiero lost his family," said Ali.

"To the Southerns?" said Jonathan.

"Yeah, they flattened this piece of crap's village, and somehow he escaped. He started screaming at the guys from Southern, went after them with a stick."

"What happened?" said Petey.

"Their Doc got 'em all out of there and sent them back to base. I heard they got the guy later, but who knows?"

"Creepy," said Petey.

"Yeah," said Jonathan. "Other people know more about what we did than we know."

Petey and Ali looked at him. "It's our job not to remember," Ali said. "That's how we have fun, didn't they tell you?"

One of the women across the way was still looking at them. Her hair was black, not gray, so she was younger than the others. Jonathan met her gaze for a minute. She straightened up and watched him.

"Hey, Jonno, who's that looking at you?" Petey said.

"I don't know," said Jonathan. His heart was pounding again. Would this woman come after him? If so, would he know why? No. He would not.

"Want us to make her stop for you?" said Ali, and he and Petey laughed.

"Shut up," said Jonathan.

"What's your problem?" said Ali. "Whose side are you on?"

The woman had started to walk toward them. The fountain plopped. The other clothsellers stopped what they were doing to watch, and two of them caught the woman's arms and tried to pull her back, but she shook them off.

"Let's go," said Jonathan, and stood up. He would remember this situation – it wasn't the kind of thing Doc gave them pills for – and he didn't like the thought.

"The hell you say, little brother," said Ali. He got up and started toward the woman.

Jonathan got in front of him and started pushing him back, but Petey was pounding him and Ali both, trying to get them to stop. He glanced back, and saw that the woman had paused. Then Ali got him in the face, and he had swung back, and then suddenly he didn't know where he was. It was dark, and there were many sounds, but they were far away, and he didn't know if they were real or not. He didn't know if he was real, either, or just something made up to fill the places in between where he couldn't remember. There were explosions, maybe nearby, maybe in his head. A child was screaming for its mother. Or maybe that was him, screaming at Ali. He couldn't tell. He didn't want to know. He wanted the pill. He wanted Doc.

THEY GOT HIM TO THE INFIRMARY, still shaking and hyperventilating, and Matron Vozavella gave him a shot to calm him down before calling Doc.

"Go away and leave him alone," she told Petey and Ali. "He needs to face this himself."

Petey had been gnawing his thumb, staring down at the bed, and Ali was pacing, slapping the back of one hand into the palm of the other. Now the two of them gave each other a long look, then turned away. Jonathan thought it must be the same as when a boat you think is going to save you turns and sails in the other direction. Everybody would know now. They would all know that he was different from them. And there was no reason for them to forget *that*.

"Here's Doc," said Matron, and stepped away.

Doc sat down next to the bed.

"I'm sorry, Doc," Jonathan said.

Doc patted his arm, then gripped it before letting go. "I know that, son," he said. "What happened?"

"We were sitting there, and it was all sunny and nice, and they wanted to go after some civilians that were there. That isn't the way we do things, is it, sir?"

"I know you and your brothers had a fight. Ali said there was a woman?"

Despite the sedative, Jonathan felt cold. *I heard they got the guy later.* "I don't even remember, sir. I just didn't feel right about attacking people out in the open like that. It doesn't make us look good."

Doc took a deep breath in, held it for a second, then let it out, as if it were a sigh. He sat back. "You know that sometimes soldiers disadapt to the drugs," he said.

"I've heard that, sir, yes," said Jonathan.

"The drugs are a gift, you know that, don't you?"

"Yes, sir, I do," Jonathan said. He knew it was true. And part of him was screaming for him to get up and wreck the room.

"They work beautifully, as long as there's not undue resistance by the subject. If there's too much resistance, the biochemical pathways remain untouched, and the memories become permanent. So in a way, they work because we're willing for them to work, you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"They're also part of the package, son," Doc said.

Jonathan swallowed.

"Do you understand what I mean by that? The life of the family is tied up with the drugs. We can't have one without the other. You become a tribe from such a young age because you spend so much time together, and you can do anything you need to do on the battlefield because you know you won't have to remember it. The structure of the family makes you disciplined and responsible. We couldn't have individuals, especially highly trained ones, wandering around doing whatever they wanted, knowing they could just forget about it afterward. Do you follow what I'm saying, son? This is why these drugs are so tightly regulated by the military." He leaned forward again, and they stared at each other. "You're part of my family, Jonathan," said Doc. "I've known you your whole life. It would rip my heart out if you weren't with us. Really with us."

Jonathan looked into Doc's eyes. He wasn't sure what he was seeing. No, that wasn't true. "I'm sorry, sir," he said. "I'll work it out. It won't happen again."

Doc gripped his hands in both of his. "I'm glad," he said. "Truly. Get some rest. See you at dinner. There's another mission tomorrow night." He clapped Jonathan's shoulder and left.

Nobody spoke to him at dinner, not even Tula, who sat across from him farther down the long table, staring at him as if he were someone she had just met. That had never happened before. He had trouble eating. Nobody spoke to him at bedtime, either. No pill that night. No way to forget the day. He lay there for hours, wondering what the others were thinking. Who were they, really, him included? What if he left on his own? He wouldn't last. A day, maybe two. They would come after him – Doc would make them do it. And then he would give them a pill to forget they had killed their own brother.

THE NEXT DAY WAS EVEN MORE beautiful than the preceding one, which made things harder. It reminded him of what had happened in the square.

They did drill all morning in full gear, and Doc rode them hard. The others didn't ignore him, but there was no conversation that included him. A couple of times he caught Tula looking at him. She was always too far away to talk to, though.

Finally lunch was over and they had free time. He took off all his gear except a knife and headed down to the river, clambering along the bank still dressed in his camsuit. He lost track of how long he had been struggling through the undergrowth, slashing at the damp branches. Finally he sat down on a big root thrown out by a tree and looked through a low, leafy branch at the water rushing below, his eyes flicking constantly to follow the gleam of a ripple downstream, then, when it disappeared, returning to find a new ripple. High up, behind him, a bird called endlessly to some other bird.

The river was the only thing he could see here; he sat in a little green cocoon. The jungle hid the town as well, and the barracks and the rest of the base were behind him to the right, up the hill and beyond the vines and face-slapping shrubs and tall trees he had stumbled through.

He realized now that he had been here once, a long time before, when they were all still kids. It was a memory he had forgotten, in the way that normal people forgot things, and then had remembered, the way normal people recalled things that only seemed forgotten. He and Booboo and Petey and Yakkis had made their way down next to the water and arced pebbles as high and far as they could, listening to the plunk they made going into the river. He remembered pulling back and forth on the trees to disturb the birds, whose cries had amused Petey. Another bird was calling now.

A woman emerged from the jungle opposite, and he shrank back. It was the woman from the square the day before: long

NOTHING DOC HAD EVER SAID HAD PREPARED HIM FOR THIS. THIS WASN'T THE TOWN; THIS WAS ALMOST THE GROUNDS OF THE BASE ITSELF, THE AREA WHERE THE QUIEROS NEVER VENTURED

pale brown robes, black hair down to her waist. He stared at her. What was she doing so close to the base? She waded across the water, gathering her robe to her knees, then abandoning the effort once the water got deeper in the middle. Jonathan got up from the tree root and faded back behind the tree itself.

Reaching Jonathan's side of the river, the woman wrung out the bottom part of her robe. Then she stood for a long time in the sunshine, her face up, her eyes closed. Jonathan watched her for a moment. He felt as if he were breathing the same breaths she was breathing, very slowly, in and out.

Nothing Doc had ever said had prepared him for this. This wasn't the town; this was almost the grounds of the base itself, the area where the Quieros never ventured. Yet the woman didn't appear to be armed. And he had never just watched someone outside of the family close up like this, someone whose life was continuous, someone who only forgot what a normal person would forget. Peering out at her, he wondered what it would be like, to be able to recollect your whole life.

Carefully, slowly, he stepped out from behind the tree and lifted aside the downswept branch that had partially concealed him. The woman whirled and gasped, and plunged back into the river, but Jonathan reached her in a few big steps and grabbed her arms. She thrashed in the water, crying out, struggling to get away from him. This must be what happens during the missions, he thought. They must writhe like this when we catch them, trying to escape before we can kill them.

"Stop it," he said. "Stop yelling. I won't hurt you." She kept struggling, and he hit her face. She gasped again and froze, pulling as far away from him as she could, a rigid mass half-kneeling in the river. He towered over her, grasping her arms, hearing the rush of the river, feeling the water foaming coldly around his knees. "Quiet down," he said again. "I'm not going to hurt you. I just want to know what you're doing here."

"You already hurt me," she said, in the heavy accent of the Quieros.

"I hit you because you wouldn't stop yelling. Where did you come from?"

"Why should I stop? You are one of them," she answered. "Your souls are missing. You kill and have no memory." Her eyes were painful to look at, they were so angry and so afraid. Blood was rolling down from her nose.

"One of them. Yes, I am one of them," he said. "What are you doing here?"

Her mouth drew down. She began to weep, the tears mixing with the blood around her mouth. She sobbed in his arms, and he kept hold of her, but let her kneel all the way down, kneeling with her. Her head bent down. She sobbed.

Jonathan tried to remember the last time he had seen someone cry, but couldn't. It was a helpless feeling to watch her, like the feeling he often had with Doc. "What is it?" he said. "Why are you crying?" At this she tried again to get away, but he held onto her. "Tell me," he said.

"I had to see for myself," she said.

"See what? The base? You already know it's there. It's been there for years. Longer than I've been alive."

She shook her head.

"What, then?"

She looked up at him, and this time she seemed to see him. He had the same sense of contact he had – the sense of contact he used to have, he corrected to himself – when he and Tula played games out in the courtyard. A connection. But, of course, this woman was not part of the family.

"It was so long ago, and it was at night, but I remember it as clearly as this day," she said. "You came. Not you, but the ones like you, the ones before you. I was asleep just like the rest of the settlement. And I heard a noise. And then screaming, and there was fire. And someone – " she took a big convulsive breath – "someone came into the tent and took away my – my – " she broke down again, wailing this time.

"Your child," said Jonathan. But the woman had collapsed completely. He let her go and stood up, listening to her sobs.

Her hair was still black. Her child might be a teenager by now.

The woman reached out and touched his boot, his knee. He took a step back. "What are you doing?" he said.

"You might be him," she said. "I just wanted to touch you, any one of you. I thought if I touched the evil, I might touch him. He might hear me. He might know that I still love him, no matter what he has done."

Jonathan took another step back, and she did not try to follow. She had sat back on her haunches in the water and her hands were on the bottom, as if she were putting palm prints on the riverbed. He could see tears dripping off her face into the current, still pink with blood. "You're lying," he said. "Go home. Go back where you came from."

"No," she said. It was a moan, not a word. "There is no place to go. Finish me. Finish me, please."

She tore her robe, and he saw the scar from the long-ago wound. A knife like the one he had now? An electric bayonet?

"I can't do that," he said. "Go home."

"We give birth to you, then you kill us and take our nextborn to make them into the no-souls," she said, beating the water with her fists. "I do not want to live. Kill me. Finish me. Finish me."

She rose and staggered toward him, one hand outstretched, the other keeping her robe from tripping her. He moved backward toward the bank. "Get away from me," he said. "Go home."

She tried to follow him, but he turned and ran. As he fled through the jungle, he could hear her voice calling him, crying out for him to kill her, until finally it merged with the cries of the birds overhead and died away altogether.

THEY WALKED OUT TO THE RACK ship as the sun was falling that evening. Though the others hadn't spoken to him while they were gearing up, Jonathan

This story has been illustrated by d. canada

HE JUMPED OUT WITHOUT WAITING FOR THE ORDER, AND GOT A GRENADE INTO HIS HAND. WHEN HE TURNED AROUND, DOC HAD RISEN TO HIS FEET, MOUTH OPEN, AS IF ABOUT TO SAY SOMETHING

felt comforted by their presence, by their bodies. They were his family. He couldn't remember anybody but them, his whole life. Their smell, their voices, were what he knew.

"Gang way, boys and girls." They turned to see Doc, in full gear, heading toward the ship. "Follow me, kids," he said. "I don't usually come with you, but I need to keep my hand in. Let's go." He glanced at Jonathan and then walked up the ramp.

The others crowded into the ship. Jonathan followed, taking the only seat left, at the exit. He would be the first one off, and Doc would be able to keep an eye on him easily. Jonathan wondered if keeping an eye on him was why Doc was really there.

At least Tula was next to him. She gave him a sober look when he sat down. He had trouble meeting her eyes. Instead, as the ship rocked and the engines began to push it upward, he gazed out the little window opposite, behind Itsy's head. He could just see the plaque on the doorway of the barracks. *Live In The Present.* Then the ship rocked as the engines began to push it upward, sending out a blur of exhaust, and the plaque sank out of view.

They flew into the sunset. There was a hush over the whole inner chamber, broken only by the occasional murmur.

What would happen, Jonathan thought, if the ship blew up and they all died? Nothing. They would be replaced. He could see the darkening jungle outside through the window. Everything was like the jungle. Things died, or were killed by other things, and they were replaced. You only mattered if you were remembered by somebody else. Like the woman in the river. Whose mother was she? His? Someone on this ship? Somebody in another unit? She would be remembered when she died.

Unless Doc had tracked her down, and Jonathan and the others were heading toward her settlement right now, to wipe out everyone there. *I heard they got the guy later.* That must be the other reason Doc was coming with them. Not just to keep an eye on Jonathan. But also to make sure what had happened in the fountain square wouldn't happen again.

"We're Quieros," he said to Tula in a low voice.

She turned her face to him as if he had said something she couldn't quite catch. "We're what?" she said.

"They steal a batch of us once in awhile from the settlements and then raise us themselves."

She furrowed her brow. Then she shook her head, as if she were shaking a bug away. The ship shuddered as they rose over a range of hills, then its systems evened out the ride over the choppy air.

"Where did this come from?" she said. "How do you know?"

"I met a woman at the river today who told me."

"She was lying," said Tula. "We're from Earth. Hand picked."

"Kidnapped. She wasn't lying. I could tell."

"She was trying to mess up your mind. God knows it's messed up enough already."

He shook his head, just a little, so Doc wouldn't see the movement.

Tula considered what he was saying. "Does Doc know you know this?" she said, lowering her voice more.

"No."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," he said.

"How are you going to remember it?" she said. "It happened earlier today, so it'll probably be wiped out with the mission memory."

He looked out the window. They were starting to descend.

"I don't know," he said again. "Maybe run away. Would you come with me?"

She smiled a little, and rubbed her fist up and down his arm. "Where would we go?" she said. "No place I know." She sounded sad.

He nodded, and then the ship touched down. He stroked her face. The ramp whined, arching outward to the ground.

He jumped out without waiting for the order, and got a grenade into his hand. When he turned around, Doc had risen to his feet, mouth open, as if about to say something. His gun came up, ready to fire out at Jonathan.

But it was too late, because the grenade had already left Jonathan's hand, and it exploded the instant it landed on the floor of the chamber. Jonathan had thrown himself on the ground, so he didn't see the hull crack with the force of the explosion, or see the expressions on the faces of his brothers and sisters. But he felt the impact in his belly, felt the shower of metal sear his back. His ears went dim, but through the dimness he heard the hiss of the metallic dust, and someone screaming – he hoped it wasn't Tula – and the plopping of body parts around him. After that, he heard the low rush and sizzle of the fire as the ship burned. He crawled under a nearby bush and lay there for a long time.

Would they bother identifying everybody who was on the ship? Would they know he was gone? Probably not. He and the others could be replaced. Doc was a little more important, but even he could be replaced.

Somebody knew he was here, though. He could feel them watching. They stayed away until almost dawn. By then the fire had died down, and he was able to salvage weapons from Jorge and Petey and Ali. All four had been sitting near the ramp, and their bodies were almost intact. As close as Tula had been to the ramp, though, he couldn't find her body, just one of her hands, the early light making the black of her skin barely visible against his palm. He stroked the slender fingers, coughing from the bitter aftersmell of the fire. Some distance away, a bird had begun to call out.

He thought about the woman in the river. He could remember her clearly. Maybe the people watching him would help him find her, if he could convince them he was no danger to them.

"One of you," he finally said aloud, his voice cracking. He spoke up, and this time he knew they would hear him. "I'm one of you."

This is Karen's second published story following her debut with 'Miko' in TTA36. She has also recently sold a story to *Realms of Fantasy*

Electric Darkness

Lord of the Rings was the artistic triumph no one could have imagined in their wildest dreams. The fantasy trilogy has stamped the bogus adventures of *Star Wars* into the ground

LotR: Return of the King

Some insiders are arguing tha endgame, and all that's left is

And so it has ended. *Lord of the Rings* was the artistic triumph no one could have imagined in their wildest dreams. The fantasy trilogy has stamped the bogus adventures of *Star Wars* into the ground, and Peter Jackson has raised the bar beyond the capabilities of almost any other director in the world. Unencumbered by exposition, the climax was free to soar and make the hearts of audiences sing. More importantly, art, the enemy of commerce, founded a rare unity with the box office – but was there ever a more nightmarish duality facing the movies? For years the BBC struggled to film *Gormenghast*, and when they finally did so, squashed it into a constricting budget and time slot. Now we can only fantasise about Peter Jackson's version.

To Hollywood, films are trade figures, profit and loss, like arms exports or automobiles, to the point where even respected directors speak of 'product'. To Europe, by and large, they're auteur pieces that must remain unsullied by anything so grubby as box office cash – except when they're aping the US. American industry insiders are genuinely mystified as to why anyone would want to make most European films, and sometimes they have a good point. What they tend to assume, though, is that all directors want their films to go global. "Why wouldn't they?" a senior executive asked me recently, adding, "It's about getting maximum visibility for your stories." The obvious answer is that, as you make something more universally acceptable, you inevitably bland it out, rubbing off the sharpness that drew you to the project. As the film's budget rises, more people come on board and compromises have to be made. As Zero Mostel said sarcastically in *The Producers*, "Everyone wants to be a big shot." So now, even small 'B' movies get 'A' picture budgets. Yes, the makers of *Below* and *Reign of Fire*, I mean you.

As a consequence, good films can simply get lost in all the shouting. With eight or so releases in the UK every week the stranglehold of the blockbuster increases, and even finding out about films is a full-time job, especially as British movie magazines offer little more than recycled press releases, having been bitch-slapped by the majors into total critical bypass. It was a pleasure to find the elliptical, strange and frankly disjointed *Donnie Darko* clicking with an audience attuned to its surreal vibe, but what happened to *Session 9*, *Malefique*, *Cypher*, *Avalon* and *Darkness*? Truth is, they are all in some way or another B-movies, but I mean that in a flattering way. Good B-movies as written by John Sayles, David Twohy or Larry Cohen offered tight scripts, tight budgets and tight skirts, but now every release has to look big – or at least, edited to within an inch of its life to disguise budgetary constraints – in order to compete. *Reign of Fire* was a 50s B-movie masquerading as a blockbuster, right down to the poster that promised more than the film delivered (where *were* those hundreds of dragons scorching the Houses of Parliament?). What we got was one creature cribbed from the infinitely superior *Dragonslayer*, smoke-filled quarries standing in for bombed-out civilisation and two stoney-faced B-list actors glistening in oil. *Dragonslayer* was resolutely A-list because of its darkly glittering script and Ralph Richardson's eerie turn as a self-deprecating wizard with nothing left to lose. ("We don't do tricks," warns the wizard's sidekick when the townspeople want to be impressed by magic, which might have been the director's way of saying 'this is about story, not sensationalism'.)

The *Matrix* films summed up the problem – you start with a good old SF stand-by plot – life is a construct we must shatter to be free – jazz it up with tasty flavour-of-the-month camera tricks, then spectacularly run out of ideas, so art is forced into commerce. Wouldn't it have been more interesting to wonder *why* we must be free if dreaming is better than reality, as *Open Your Eyes* did?

In the wake of the *Matrix* phenomenon – a triumph of blanket release dates over content – we'll be seeing more films carved into serial-style pieces. *Kill Bill* already chose to go this

at cinema itself is reaching an a cannibalistic feeding-frenzy

It was a pleasure to find the elliptical, strange and disjointed *Donnie Darko* clicking with an audience attuned to its surreal vibe, but what happened to *Session 9*, *Malefique*, *Cypher*, *Avalon* and *Darkness*?

route, and there are others in the works. Superhero films are episodic by nature, and one has a sense of each movie ticking the most popular villains off lists of opponents. It's interesting to note that the villains get younger and cooler; *Spider-man 2* net art shows Doctor Octopus looking like a twentysomething Peter Cook. At the tail of such cycles, we reach *House of Frankenstein* mode whereby diminishing returns are compensated by smackdown teams of villains, so Spiderman will doubtless end up facing The Vulture, The Scorpion and The Reptile in a veritable zootime treat of an endgame. *Van Helsing*, the updated *House of Frankenstein* team-up, is waiting in the wings, while the script of *Predator vs Alien* is already attracting hate-mail on the internet. Can we expect more outrageous crossovers? *Jason Goes To Monte Carlo*, perhaps, or *Amelie vs Ripley*. Some insiders are arguing that cinema itself is reaching an endgame, and all that's left is a cannibalistic feeding-frenzy. As the US attempts ever more draconian measures to stem film piracy, fast new methods of downloading are becoming available.

But it's good to see that real B-movies can still proudly proclaim their heritage and make money. The huge success of *Cabin Fever* was richly deserved, as it melded homages to *The Evil Dead* with genuinely original ideas – such as revealing the teenagers to be, at heart, as selfish, vacuous and well, *normal* as they first appear. The worst B-movies are the ones that desperately want to be hip, like the barely watchable *Long Time Dead*. The best are those that don't care whether they're cool or not. English films were never good at being fashionable, so in many ways, English B-movie horrors were the most fun. Peter Walker's fantastically mean-spirited trio *House of Whipcord*, *Frightmare* and *House of Mortal Sin* combined bone-deep cynicism with 70s wallpaper to terrifying effect, although the tension has a habit of dissipating when I suddenly catch myself thinking *what on earth is Stephanie Beacham wearing?*

Clive Barker once gave a well-received speech in which he puzzled over the fact that critics complain about the lack of originality in horror films, whereas they never complain about the cliché of a boy and girl falling in love in romantic comedies. He was perhaps being a little disingenuous; the latter state is a daily fact of life, whereas someone walking into a haunted house or being eaten by demons isn't. B-movies survive on the sheer nerve of their plotlines. Peter Walker's big three can be summarised as 'Law punishes sinners in kangaroo courts', 'Nuclear family unit preys on singles to survive' and 'The church uses catholic iconography to destroy faith'. This is real life multiplied by the infinity factor. At the other end of the scale, movies like *The Mutations* (walking cabbage eats Julie Ege) and *Psychomania* (elderly teen bikers drive out of graves) are wonderful precisely because they're so unfashionable. Such films are at least prepared to escape the standard templates of horror.

Among my favourite unloved B-horrors are those of maverick US directors Larry Cohen and Jeff Lieberman. The former has nearly sixty credits to his name, including *Daddy's Gone A-Hunting*, starring the beautiful ill-fated British actress Carol White; the monster-baby flick *It's Alive!* and its two sequels; *God Told Me To*; *Q – The Winged Serpent*; *The Stuff*; *Maniac Cop*; *The Ambulance*; and *Phone Booth*. Cinematographically speaking, most of his films look like they've been printed on greaseproof paper, but his ideas are the thing, even if they're not always worked through to the best advantage. *The Stuff* was a swipe at mass consumerism, about a brand of addictive mutation-creating supermarket yoghurt. *Q* mixed Aztec mythology into its tale of a giant stop-frame animated flying serpent. *Maniac Cop* (strapline: You have the right to remain silent – forever!) warned that we might be putting too much trust in authority. *Daddy's Gone A-Hunting* played on pressures and fears of single parenthood, as White fought to protect her child from its anti-abortionist father.

Donnie Darko

Octane is so cruelly disappointing one can only assume the director threw up his hands on the second half of the shoot with a cry of "Oh, fuck it – let's go home"

Octane

Jeff Leiberman created new horror legends with *Squirm* and *Blue Sunshine* (both 1976) and *Just Before Dawn* (1982). *Blue Sunshine* is especially smart, as it concerns the effects of drugs on a generation that experimented with them as teens who have now entered 'respectable' society a decade later, only to discover that they are turning into balding, rage-filled maniacs. Having been made at a time when the first LSD generation was hitting its thirties, it probably worried a lot of audiences. The hero of *Blue Sunshine* is played by Zalman King, who was later to achieve fame as the director of the soft-core sleaze series *The Red Shoe Diaries*. King turns in what must be the most peculiar performance of all time by a leading actor, appearing to be barely conscious, and occasionally looking as though he is about to fall fast asleep in the middle of insanely protracted conversations in which he seems to forget what he is saying.

In the new race to copyright ideas, it's about time we learned a few lessons from our more successful cousins, especially as the much-touted British horror revival is proving such a letdown. *Octane* is so cruelly disappointing one can only assume the director threw up his hands on the second half of the shoot with a cry of "Oh, fuck it – let's go home."

Once you stop worrying about embarrassing yourself, it's great to love unfashionable films. Recently, the tide of fashion turned against the remake of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* in the UK, and it received a critical drubbing, yet it was a smart addition to the inbred-hillbilly horror cycle, and sprang some surprises which would have benefited the original. In particular, it understood a fundamental principle behind the success of the first film, that, at the time when it was originally made, the scenario was plausible because a genuine trisson of mistrust and even danger existed between urban teenagers and rural families. I love horror road-movies, by the way. Let's have a Horror Road-Movie Classics List:

The Texas Chainsaw Massacres
(all except the fourth one)
Cabin Fever
Dead End
Highway to Hell
Wrong Turn
Jeepers Creepers
The Hills Have Eyes
Race With the Devil
Retroactive
Breakdown
Road Kill
Duel
The Hitcher

The love of embarrassing films is akin to having a passion for awful songs. I'm prepared to own up to my bizarre tastes. I liked the Hammer films that had Ralph Bates in, for God's sake. I love old Norman Wisdom films because they are much stranger than you remember. In *On the Beat*, Wisdom and a doctor sing an eye chart for no apparent reason, and a police chase turns into a steeplechase. In *The Early Bird*, a game of golf is played in a tree, and Wisdom hallucinates a horse's head onto his landlady's shoulders.

Okay, learning from old Norman Wisdom films is an extreme example, but did you learn anything at all from *Jason vs Freddy* apart from 'Don't make the film until you've written the script'? Will we ever be able to learn from strange little films again? I hope so. I recently watched the German sequel *Anatomy 2* and was delighted to find it filled with gripping ideas. Prometheus, Nietzsche and Nazism, body image, idealism, competition and the betrayal of ideals are all thrillingly explored within the context of a horror framework. But the British horror films now being made ape their US counterparts, and suffer in comparison. If *Cabin Fever* had been made over here, the teens would have been self-conscious clubbers against an eclectic soundtrack featuring The Darkness and The White Stripes. The point of working with no budget is that you don't have to follow the rules. Peter Jackson threw away the rulebook – he played out scenes, trusting his instincts. It's a lesson we could all learn.

Christopher Fowler's latest book is the story collection *Demonized* (Serpent's Tail, £10/$15).

Ryu Murakami 'the closest thing to Irvine Welsh Japan has yet produced'

JAPAN'S DARK LANTERNS

'A unique action flick that roars onto the screen with the subtlety of a shotgun blast to the head'. . . 'another deeply flawed addition to the deeply offensive phenomenon of "reality TV"'. . . 'a film that should not be easily ignored, and will not be easily forgotten'. . . Western reviewers were at a loss when Japan treated us to the first *Battle Royale* film back in 2000. Was it a biting indictment of current Japanese society? Or just exploitative pulp?

As thought-provoking as the novel by Koushun Takami and the film by director Kinji Fukasaku may be, the attention has overshadowed a novel on a similar theme, but even more controversial; a novel awaiting English translation. This is *Exodus From a Hopeless Country* by Ryu Murakami.

A word or two about the author: he is the closest thing to Irvine Welsh Japan has yet produced, and is no relation – either by blood or temperament – to the novelist Haruki Murakami. He won the Akutagawa Prize for Literature in 1976 with his first novel *Almost Transparent Blue*, depicting the nihilistic lives of Japanese teenagers living near a US army base. *Coin Locker Babies* portrayed the revenge of two individuals unable to fit in with cookie-cutter Japanese society, in a way that eerily foreshadowed 1995's nerve gas attack on the Tokyo subway by the Aum Shinrikyo. The psycho-shocker *Audition* was based on one of his novels. His latest book available in English (from Vertical Inc.) is *In the Miso Soup*, another exploration of the dark side of Tokyo's underbelly. Murakami's characters are constantly on the edge; in their dialogue and their actions, they are reacting to the violence and mindlessness of everyday life that we, the readers, try to screen ourselves from.

In 1999 Bungei Shunju published his novel *Exodus From a Hopeless Country*, perhaps his most ambitious and thought-provoking novel to date. The story is set in 2001, where Japan is experiencing a social crisis (just as in *Battle Royale*), with over 800,000 children having dropped out of school. The narrator, reporter Tetsuji Sekiguchi, covers the story of a Japanese schoolboy who has joined a nomadic tribe on the Afghan-Pakistani border, helping on mine-clearance operations. Associates of the boy, Nakamura and Kusuda, launch an Internet news service targeted at Japanese junior and senior high school students, intent on initiating and coordinating acts of government resistance.

Time passes and Japan's crisis deepens. Kusuda takes part in an online debate with the Government and declares, 'There is everything in this country – except hope.'

The scene shifts to 2005, when Nakamura and Kusuda gain enough followers to relocate to the northern island of Hokkaido, where – with the aid of local municipalities – they actually secede from Japan and set up their own independent community.

By now, the reader is probably waiting for a *Lord of the Flies* resolution, the fatal flaw that leads to the expulsion of the youngsters from their chosen paradise; but that payoff never comes. The end of the novel – in 2008 – finds the community still functioning in a state of social, political and ecological stability.

The *Asahi* newspaper declared this book a 'must-read'. It's certainly a more uplifting, thought-provoking work than *Battle Royale* and its cinema adaptation. But what is it about the educational system that they are both objecting to? What is it about Japan's schools that drive youngsters – in real life and in fiction – to violence, suicide and despair?

This is not the kind of country where for a large number of teenagers, selling drugs, selling their bodies or picking up a gun is necessary to get through the day. Japanese teenagers have an extraordinary range of toys to play with – rental CD shops, ultra-modern game consoles, and the indispensable mobile phone – and substantial parental savings to draw from. There are ranges of cosmetics for the image-conscious – both girls and boys. Japanese parents are, in general, indulgent and supportive. Sure, for graduates, there are not as many jobs around as there used to be, but it's like that everywhere. Is this what Murakami called a land without hope?

Loss of values? Teenage morality has been a cause for concern ever since the end of the War. The novel *Season of the Sun*, by Shintaro Ishihara, shocked readers with its depictions of hedonistic teenagers defying Japanese respectability – and that came out in 1955. Social crisis? What crisis?

Having said that it's a tired cliché to blame youth for their perceived lack of moral fibre, a look through the leading news stories of recent years reveals some gruesome and disturbing events. In 1997, a 14-year-old boy (unnamed under Japanese law) decapitated an 11-year-old male neighbour and stuck the severed head on the local school's front steps. In 2000, a 17-year-old boy hijacked a bus in Kyushu, stabbing one female passenger to death, and in the same year, a 17-year-old boy went berserk in Tokyo's Shibuya district, assaulting seven strangers with a baseball bat. In July 2003, a 12-year-old threw a 4-year-old boy to his death from the roof of a multi-storey car park.

Mental aberrations? The incoherent actions of misfits who 'just couldn't take it anymore'? Blips on the radar of an otherwise safe society?

Whatever explanation the media tries to force on us, the fact is that a law came into effect in April 2001 that lowered the age of criminal responsibility from 14 to 16 years old. Commentators in and outside Japan feel that *something* is going on with the country's youth; and an increasing number of them are putting the blame on the education system. In my next column, I'll be taking a look inside Japan's classrooms, to see what – if anything – we should be afraid of.

Talk with JP about this column or his life in Japan at www.ttapress.com/discus

A QUICK AND SURPRISING SUNDAY MORNING

A NEW STORY BY
GAVIN J. GRANT
ILLUSTRATIONS BY EDWARD NOON
RHYTHMS AND COMPLICATIONS
SYNESTHESIA, AND OTHER ADDITIONS, COMPANIONS AND SUBTRACTIONS OF WAR

war had much thinned the global population. It had solved a lot of problems, Jeremy thought, in the same way a battery hen might think getting decapitated would solve a lot of problems.

Later he adjusted his dramatized version of the day back toward the truth. Yes, he'd been trawling the internet at the Leaf & Bean Café in Portland, but it had been very quiet. It hadn't been packed with people listening to his calm announcements as the news came slowly dribbling in, routed and re-routed through smaller and smaller lines as the cities disappeared.

There had been only two other people in the Leaf, not counting his friend Matt. A tall, dark-haired woman his own age brought over her thick Sunday *New York Times* and introduced herself as Jennifer. Before the news flash had caught his attention he'd been watching her and wondering how to entice her into conversation. She wrapped her arms around her paper tighter and tighter. "I can't believe," she'd said, "this is the last *Times* I'll ever read."

The young girl behind the counter with the red-brown hair and the quick smile watched as the three of them got quieter and more serious. "I'm Heidi," she'd said, twisting her hands in a dishrag, when she joined them.

Jennifer woke up early that morning, almost three months to the day after the war, knowing what was missing. She ran downstairs ignoring her mother's half-asleep questions and her own knees creaking like the unlocked kitchen door, and out into their small back garden. It was still dark and she could hear the pigeons muttering from underneath the eaves. She walked through the flower and vegetable beds listening carefully but she already knew she was right. Kneeling, she poked at one of the early lettuces. Her mother came running out, hair in pink curlers, still wrapping her thick white robe around herself.

"Anne-Elyse! Why are you up so early?" Jennifer's mother had called her Anne-Elyse ever since the war. Everyone else still called her Jennifer. JENNIFER DALRHEZA was embossed in little gold letters on her credit card, yet she still wasn't quite sure who was right. The different rhythms of each name played on the edge of her awareness. Jen-ni-fer. Anne-El-yse.

"Shh," she said to her mother. "Listen. Can you hear them?"

Her mother, still barefoot, picked her way over. "Hear what?"

Her mother had said, *Anne-Elyse! How can we remember if everyone goes around changing their names?* Jennifer had answered, *Remember what?*

"Bees, wasps. Flies. It's early but I don't think we'll hear them later, either. Look, the caterpillars that were eating the lettuce are gone."

"You're right," said her mother, "that's great."

"There haven't been any ants in the kitchen."

"Why not?" her mother asked.

"I don't know, mom. I dreamt a mosquito was bothering me and I woke up knowing."

"I hate dreams," her mother said. "Knowing what?"

Jennifer stretched her back. She felt as if she'd just put down her backpack after a long hike. "Don't you feel lighter, mom?" she asked.

Her mother looked at her. "You've gone white, you know," she said. "Are you feeling OK?"

They both rose, looking around. The apple trees surrounding the garden looked lean in the last stretch of night.

"The war," Jennifer said to herself. "Mom, I don't think there are any insects here. Can you imagine?"

"Come back inside. I'll call Pete at the high school in the morning. He's as close as we have to a science guy. Do you remember him?"

"Pete? Mr Dryker? My old science teacher?" Jennifer held her nose theatrically.

Her mother laughed, scaring a pair of finches that had been poking desperately at the empty soil into flight, and took her arm. They walked carefully back across the lettuce, beets and cabbages to the kitchen, Jennifer humming tunelessly.

Matt was the third of three brothers. He'd waited through his early teenage years for his two older brothers to get caught up in something and be dragged away. He knew that if there was a princess to rescue it would be Arlena Jacobs, and even – or especially – at 11 years old, he was impatient. He loved her knees, so thin and far from the ground. Her polished black Mary Janes, her orange winter coat that reappeared year after year and made it increasingly obvious that her early spring to a glorious five feet four was all the height she would ever reach.

Arlena's family thought Matt much cuter than either Arlena or Matt thought he was. Arlena used him sometimes. In math class she let him crawl under the desks and bring her answers, careful to keep him to the side, hidden by her coat. She'd eat from his lunch if she didn't like her own, but the day after graduation – and there was no magical prom night for Matt – she took her father's car and disappeared.

The car was found a week later outside Sandusky, Ohio, which is where Matt headed to find her. He didn't even wait for his brothers to go first. He left his parents a note saying he'd be back soon – or at least by September when he was headed to Iowa State to study economics, or maybe geography.

He took his savings from his window-guy job at the carwash and bought a Greyhound ticket to Sandusky. He was halfway there when he saw in *The Chicago Tribune* that Arlena's body had been found in a shallow grave near I-90 and the police already had a suspect in custody. Matt didn't get back on the bus. Instead he wandered the streets around the bus station until dark.

He thought, when he checked into the cheapest hotel he could find, that he should have asked his older brothers to go first. He thought he'd saved them by going first, instead he'd killed Arlena.

By his mid-20s, he settled on telling a quick and glib lie about going west as a young man when people asked him how a corn-fed Iowa farm boy ended up in Oregon. He had told Jeremy the truth but, after it inspired a long session of true and horrible stories, never anyone else.

He often thought about Arlena, about where she might have been if he had caught up with her in time. If she had asked him to go with her, would he have gone? She'd wanted to go to New York or Los Angeles – "Somewhere things *happen*." He wasn't sure Portland counted. He had been a different kind of kid, focused on the ground in front of him; not the bus station, the planes passing over. He'd been happy to be where she was, to listen if she spoke to him. He hadn't begun to understand her until years after her death. He was still thinking over how different they had been: it bothered him how common her feelings were, how he had never felt them. He wondered if she would have been in New York or LA during the war. Wondered if he'd have been with her in one of those places where things happened. Although they were places that weren't, anymore.

Heidi had to leave home earlier now to get to the Leaf & Bean on time. Cycling took longer despite the lighter traffic. Before the war, she had been completely focused on saving enough money to buy the huge white 1960 Lincoln Mark V she passed everyday at Big Daddy Cars. Now the sound of tires rubbing along the blacktop tasted disagreeable – she had to keep Kronos Quartet on her Walkman at high volume to drown out the noise. Just the thought of driving a car made her want to throw up.

She managed to get to the café just after nine. The owner, Stan, was standing in front of the counter, flipping through a small pile of junk mail. His latest obsession was collecting catalogs from companies that hadn't survived the war. He'd been coming in a lot since Jared, the older guy who'd worked the morning shift with her, left for what had been DC.

"You're early," Heidi shouted in the door as she locked up her bike.

"You're late," Stan said, but not harshly. "I needed coffee, but . . . " He threw up his hand, frowning at an NPR catalog.

"Right. I'll start it," she said. "Can you get the lights?"

"Sure." She watched him wander around the coffee shop, straightening chairs, flicking on all the ugly little lamps he'd collected. Stan was nice, she thought, but so weird.

"A Turkish espresso and a latte, coming your way soon." She picked up a small vacuum-packed sack of dark Sumatran coffee beans to begin mixing their special blend and the sack suddenly seemed to protrude over the counter in a large oval. She closed her eyes, held on tight to the bag. She could still feel the extended oval wobbling in her hands but she knew when she opened her eyes it wouldn't be there. "Stan," she said. "Stan."

"Are you OK?" he asked, coming up to the counter.

"Yes. No. Look, do you want to make the coffee? I can't. It . . . feels wrong."

She heard him walk around and then he took the sack from her hands. "Thanks," she said. The shape disappeared at the same time and she opened her eyes. Stan was watching her; head tilted a little to the side. "Sorry," she smiled weakly at him. "I'll put the chairs and tables out. Back in a mo'."

She carried the bright red and green wooden furniture onto the sidewalk. She worked carefully, ignoring the smells and tastes, the bright orange letter F glaring out at her from each of the black and white menus.

Finished, she stood basking in the hot morning sunlight. There was a movement at the street corner and she looked to see if it was an early customer but the street was empty. She thought it must have been Moxie, a neighborhood cat who liked to sit in the Leaf's window.

Stan called out to her and she went back inside. Stan's backpack was on the table nearest the door. She went to take it up to the counter, but stopped. She could tell where he'd touched it, how he'd been carrying it. She thought she could see his future angling out from the creases of the burgundy canvas. He called again, startling her. She looked around, saw the comfortable old furniture and *smelled* the freaky paintings they'd put up last week and knew she couldn't stay.

"Stan," she said, "you've got to . . . I've got to . . . I've got to get home. Sorry. I must be coming down with . . . something."

Jeremy ambled in just before 11a.m. "Refill on that?" he asked Matt who was looking well-established in his favorite doughy armchair. Matt made a move for his wallet but Jeremy stopped him, "I'm up. Remember, I'm the rich man now." Matt grinned and went back to the crossword in the local paper. There were half a dozen other patrons scattered about in the deep couches or soaking up the sunshine outside. Most of them were like Jeremy – new to the pleasures of independent wealth. "Two Colombians, please. Oh!" he said, surprised to see Stan behind the counter. "Where's Heidi?"

Stan looked annoyed. "Came in late this morning and left five minutes later. Probably hungover. Damn kids."

Jeremy shrugged. "Seemed pretty reliable to me."

"She said the coffee felt wrong. What the hell's that? $4 even, please."

Jeremy paid and took the drinks back. "Went down to Continental Bank yesterday," he said, pushing the paper off the table to make space. "Still salaried."

"It's good to be you," said Matt.

"Sure is. Not only that, Miss Angela Richards at the customer service desk gave me the once over."

Matt looked up. "I'm sorry, I just cannot believe that. I don't believe she has ever, *once*, even faced in your direction."

Jeremy smiled and sipped his coffee. "Not every bum's still getting paid by a company that no longer exists. Who knows that better than the bank?"

Jeremy had been an adjuster in the local office of AIG, an international insurance conglomerate. When New York disappeared, he'd thought he'd be looking for work. He'd been very happy to discover, when his next paycheck arrived, that AIG had out-sourced their payroll to a small firm in South Dakota.

"I am a hot commodity, my friend."

"I thought you were going to call that woman that was here that day. Jennifer?"

"Never got her number. Thought she might come back but I haven't seen her."

"Aha! That's why you're always here."

Jeremy sat back, looked around. He knew most of the people sitting around by face, if not by name. "What else am I going to do? It's not like I can go visit my family in Seattle."

"It's the same for the rest of us here," said Matt, "but we're working, not just sitting around."

"Sitting around? I'm chronicling the times here. This is important work: observation has to happen or events don't occur! Did you know that a building was found complete and standing in Moscow? The Ukrainian Peacekeepers found it near the Volga River. Empty of people – clean bombs and all that – just more damn shadows."

"I heard the same thing happened in Osaka except there was this one guy found alive but completely out of his head. He was on JTV but the translator couldn't get any sense from him."

"I missed that. I got to watch more TV. Maybe Stan could get one."

Matt put down his crossword. "What? I can't believe you just said that, Mr 'Why-are-there-TVs-in-bars?'. Don't tell me you're going to buy one? Now I know something really is wrong with the world."

"He was always so nice in the past," Jennifer's mother said. "I

JENNIFER

don't know what's gotten into him. He was just *rude* on the phone. As if I can do anything about the supermarket not carrying pumpernickel bread anymore." She was watching the quiet city streets from the bus window.

"All I can remember about him is how badly he stank."

"Anne-Elyse!" She sounded severe but she was smiling.

"Mother! Jennifer, please? Anyway, it's true. He just stank worse than anyone else I've ever known. He'd wander around the science lab and we'd all try to keep out his way."

"He was lovely in college. I don't know what happened."

The bus dropped them off half a block from the Wild Oats market Dryker had given them as a meeting point. It didn't take long to find him; he was pacing in front of the bread section scaring off the other afternoon shoppers. He needed a shave and although he wore a brown suit, he wasn't wearing a tie. "Didn't he used to have a proper beard?" whispered her mother.

"Look," he said on seeing them. "Is this choice? Where's the pumpernickel? Where's the rye? See how Wonderbread takes up half the space here? Are we all white bread now? This shop didn't even carry it before. Oh yes, I know, I know, it's amazing how the distributors and manufacturers worked their way around the disaster areas. But I know underhanded practices and unfair competition when I see them. I know conspiracy. I know new additives when I see them, see? I know cancer-causing chemicals. I know, you know!"

Jennifer let herself space out while her mother tried to calm him down until something he said caught her attention.

"There are things missing," he said. "A week after – "

"Like the insects," she said.

" – there was plenty of pumpernickel . . . What? Insects? Yes, really? Mm? The bread?"

"Anne-Elyse noticed on Tuesday," her mother said. "I haven't seen it on the TV though, so maybe it's just here. I thought I'd mentioned it on the phone."

HEIDI

"Perhaps you did. Sorry," said Dryker. He stopped jiggling in place, his body settling under his suit. "Sorry, ah, Jennifer?" He was watching the floor in front of him and they both glanced down to see if anything was happening. "It's just that my body seems to be moving slower. If I don't remember to move, my blood doesn't run fast enough. My fingers are stiff. Sometimes I look round or hear a sound and realize that for some hours I have been unaware of what has happened."

Mr Dryker bent his head forward and held the bridge of his nose as if he had a sore head and Jennifer thought, *Maybe he never had a sense of smell.*

"I don't remember what you said. I haven't been well. I'm sorry." He looked up at Jennifer. "I've heard the strangest stories. Let's go somewhere and sit. I need to tell you a story. Maybe it's not really a story. It's what one of my pupils told me yesterday."

Jennifer looked at her mother who was reading the ingredients on a loaf of Wonderbread and said, "OK, let's go get some lunch."

MATT

Heidi eventually got out of bed. She kept her eyes closed until she was standing up. There weren't any strange noises or smells this time. She'd waited until her parents had left for work and then refused to take the covers off her face until Sandra, her 16-year-old younger sister, had gone to school. How could she say what she'd seen last night in her sister?

When her mother called she was curled up in her favorite old blanket watching a re-run of *The Young and the Restless*. She'd flushed a clump of her hair she found in her bed down the toilet and managed to ignore the mixed sensations she'd had eating breakfast.

She let the answering machine take the call and listened to the jagged glassy green of her mother's worried voice. Her sister's

sneakers (a taste of thyme) were lying against the wall under the family photo her mother insisted on taking every July fourth. The sneakers only had a few more months wear left in them. Heidi suddenly couldn't stay there, tasting the future, seeing impossible possibilities.

"Hey," said Jeremy. "Heidi, where've you been?"

Heidi frowned at him. "You're paler now. You used to be a nice sort of gold color. Did you know that?"

"Uh," said Jeremy again, taken aback. "Huh?"

"Matt, is it Matt?" asked Heidi, squinting at him. He nodded. "I've never really talked to you. But that's OK, because your throat's sore and it's hard to talk today, isn't it? It's a sharp pain, isn't it?" She closed her eyes, moved her hands to each side of his throat. "Here," she said.

"Heidi," said Stan opening the flap that separated the counter from the café, "I thought you'd quit. You back?"

"No, Stan. Working here doesn't taste quite right. Don't smile like that, makes me queasy. Your hands are noisy. You drive too much, should give yourself a rest. Running all over town looking after all those women. Uh huh."

"Jesus, Heidi," said Jeremy. "What happened to you?"

She walked past them to the window and started to stroke a large spider plant, whispering, "Sing, sing, sing."

The door opened, Stan said, "Jennifer, how you doing?"

She walked in and looked around the café.

"Hi," said Jeremy, standing, trying not to be nervous. "I was just getting her," he motioned toward the Heidi with his eyebrows, "a chamomile tea. Can I get you a latte or something?"

Jennifer looked at Matt who shrugged. Heidi was hunched over a fern. She turned and spotted Jennifer. "Your mom's got your real name. Did you know? Not yet, right? Soon though. Watch your ankles; it got you there and it's moving up. Sorry. Got my head. No thanks, no flowers, no beans." This last was directed to Jeremy, who blinked and sat down.

"Ankles?" asked Jennifer, "Damn, I thought it was my knees. Listen, have you noticed the bugs?"

No one said anything.

"The plants are like the people, or the insects are. I'm not sure which way it goes. But they depended on one another, you see? There's a big hole where the bugs were. Millions, thousands of millions of bugs are *missing*. Do you know the biomass that represents?"

No one said anything. Stan came over, wiped his hands on his apron, leaned on the back of Jeremy's armchair. Heidi stumbled over, eyes mostly closed as if dizzy, sat down next to Matt. Matt could see her hair was thinning, and he reached out to touch it. Stopped.

"I'm not her," she said.

Matt jerked back his hand. "What?" he said.

But Jennifer broke in. "My mom and I went to see my high school science teacher, Mr Dryker, about the bugs. He's completely gone, just crazy. You should hear what he has to say about bread and war. You can only have one or the other, or one with circuses or something. Don't look at me like that Jeremy. Hey, you're a bit pale, are you OK?"

Heidi looked up, "Circuses, cicadas, circumpolar, circumspect. Look!" She pointed above the doorway. "Spiral rising up from where it was set."

"None of the above, Heidi," said Jennifer. "So Dryker is raving quietly away and I am just fed up – feeling as if I'm 14 years old, trapped, so ready to go . . . and then, suddenly, in the middle of one of his rants about schoolkids *eating* all his supplies, it all came together. The way everything's changed, the way tomorrow's already gone."

"Sorry?" said Jeremy, looking up from studying the back of his hand.

Jennifer sat down, looked at them all. "We're dying," she said, and no one wanted to hear but no one interrupted.

"As far as we know, everyone dies. However, the mean age of expiration in a culture varies with a number of obvious and subtle external and internal factors. Working on the highways, in a mine, or a food-processing plant can significantly decrease your expected age of death. Eating soy products and living high up on certain mountains may increase it."

She looked at Matt, winked. "The credibility of that last statement can be questioned.

"I believe the short war of three months ago has brought forward all our expected expiration dates. It is my belief from watching the way the clouds out these somewhat dirty windows . . .

"Yes, Stan, I remember that the tall guy with all the tattoos left for DC to try and find his children and that you can't get a replacement even in these times of heightened unemployment. I know that you have increased – twice – the salary offered but there are still no applicants. Thus, I do not expect these windows to ever be cleaned.

"The clouds are different now. I used to see camels, scenes from *Gulliver's Travels*, sleeping robots. Now I cannot be certain of the shapes. I thought I saw a post office, but it sank over the YMCA before I could be sure. Just a minute ago, walking here I'd have sworn I saw my Aunt. Not my Aunt Beatrice whom you may be familiar with from her dry-cleaning store on Burnside, but my Aunt Cecilia who moved to France before I was born.

"I haven't met her since I was seven when my mother and I visited her and her companion, Rosie, in Paris. She took us to cafés, or perhaps just one café, where I was bored to tears except when she remembered my presence and included me in her stories. She was obsessed with old restaurants, dead chefs, wars and battles, morels and mushrooms, and I remember so clearly that my stomach hurt one afternoon watching a basket of croissants on the next table. I remember my hunger almost consumed me and I wondered if, when the people at the next table left, I could take the croissants.

"I couldn't. We can't. See?

"It isn't just the clouds though. When I reverse the viewpoint it's more obvious that you're all different, too.

"Look down. See how thin we are. Not to hold ourselves away from you men, but Heidi and I at least, have less hair. None of us is happy about either of these developments. Matt, your throat is sore and like Mr Dryker I see your beard is gone. You certainly don't smell as bad as him, though. Long time ago you took yourself out of the country, and now the country's been taken out of you.

"It is all of this, and more. I find it hard to see any of you, unless you stand against a dark background.

"I believe some of the intercontinental ballistic cruise missiles that passed over our guilty little heads were of a design – unpublished as yet in *Jane's* – that utilized the newest of killing substances, known in different countries variously as I-9, Bella-Bella, or U239f. I think, too, that when the rockets began flying someone too close to a certain little red button decided they might as well join the celebration. I suspect that not all of were the latest technological wonders. Not the clean-burning fuels and surgically-designed payloads of the new world order. Experiments that were not quite concluded may have been utilized. Some weapons the United Nations had wished in the past to be destroyed may instead have been deployed.

"This would account for the dandruff that Jeremy, my slim and handsome friend in front of me, who has certainly never suffered from before, now finds on his shoulders. This might explain the clouds. The additions and subtractions. The holes. The mice, the owls. The cats, the ants."

Gavin's stories have appeared in *Altair*, *SciFiction*, *Strange Horizons* and elsewhere. With Kelly Link he runs Small Beer Press, which publishes the magazine *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet* and various books.

Comics are in a bizarre situation at the moment. Never have sales been lower, yet never has interest in their intellectual properties been higher. What's more, the interest comes from the world's two biggest entertainment industries: movies and computer games.

In Britain the tiny comics industry we do have has now become little more than an adjunct to the games industry. Practically all the comics we produce are owned by games companies like Rebellion or are produced by the publishing wings of games consortiums like the Games Workshop.

In the States there are hundreds of special agencies devoted solely to developing comic properties into film and game franchises. Practically anything that once wore its underpants on the wrong side of its trousers is fair game for the developers.

Nowadays when you're commissioned to create a comic series, you start negotiating the film rights before you've even begun work on the first script or sketched out the preliminary character designs. Alan Moore sold the rights for *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* before artist Kevin O'Neil had even begun work on the first script. I once worked on a graphic novel, involving company owned characters, which stalled in the early stages of writing because the company successfully sold the rights to the idea as an animated series and decided to go straight into production on that without even bothering to publish the comic first. Sadly I'm not the *only* comics creator to be gazumped in this fashion.

So why are comics suddenly so in vogue? The first and most obvious reason is that a hardcore of comic's fan base works in the film, media and games industries. From writers and directors through to programmers and publicists, the entertainment industries are staffed and run at every level by guys who have hundreds of boxes of mylar bagged comics somewhere in their basements. Comics were often where they learned the conceptual and visual vocabulary that is so important to their careers. It's only natural that this shared vocabulary would have an influence on what types of projects get greenlighted.

The second reason lies with the huge advancements in CGI. Until a few years ago,

Script: Jaspre Bark • Art & Letters: P.J. Holden

STRIPPED BARE
COMICS TODAY, ARE THEY REALLY NOTHING MORE THAN A FACTORY FARM THAT HOLLYWOOD MILKS FOR IDEAS?
HOLD IT!
THIS IS GOING TO NEED A LOT OF WORK BEFORE WE GET IT GREENLIGHTED
ALL HIS OWN TEETH
ALL HIS OWN CRUST
WE NEED A LEADING MAN THE KIDS IDENTIFY WITH. DANGEROUS AND SEXUAL, WITH A LOOK IN HIS EYE THAT SAYS I'M GOOD WITH SMALL FURRY ANIMALS
I HEAR RICHARD GERE IS FREE.
SCRIPT JASPRE BARK ART PJ HOLDEN
VIAGRA SET ERECTION
THE KNOWING CYNICISM WILL HAVE TO GO. WE NEED A CENTRAL MESSAGE THAT WON'T ALIENATE OUR MULTIPLEX AUDIENCE
SOMETHING FAR LESS EUROPEAN
JUDGE SMIRED
SHREDFULL
GENIUS. NOW FOR MORE INSPIRATION
COMICS TODAY, ANOTHER GREAT REASON WHY WE RUN THE WORLD!
THERE'S NO BUSINESS LIKE SNOW BUSINESS

STRIPPED BARE : JASPRE BARK

most comic book characters looked wholly unconvincing whenever they made the transition to the silver screen. This is because the various adaptations were never able to make use of the character's unique selling point: their super powers.

The special effects budget was often so insufficient that we would barely believe the cast could act, let alone fly. You would only get to see the lead character use their powers once or twice in the space of the whole story, and when they did it was usually always an anticlimax and no where near as good as it was in the comics.

Not any more though. Comics no longer have the edge of showing concepts so fantastic and far-fetched that it's difficult to portray them in any other medium. Instead they're becoming a sort of think tank for inexpensively test driving ideas that the SFX guys can work on later.

Of course not all comics are solely about super human beings (even if it does feel like that at times), but the increasing popularity of the superhero as a figure of contemporary American mythology is at the core of Hollywood's fascination with comics. The superhero makes a whole lot of sense to the American mindset at the moment. It provides them with many convenient rationales for their behaviour as a global super power.

Superheroes never actively seek out their super powers (except maybe for Batman and Iron Man), they usually have them thrust upon them. They are bitten by radioactive beasties, bombarded with gamma rays or born with a mutant X gene, so they use their powers (like Plato's ideal republican leaders) for good.

Other people fear their power of course and hate them for it, hounding and persecuting them with low flying aircraft. But as soon they get kicked in the Twin Towers they turn green and go on the rampage, smashing any smaller states that stand in the way of their battle against evil. Never forgetting the old adage of the web slinger, that with great power comes great responsibility. Namely the responsibility of policing the rest of us lesser beings in spite of receiving no legal mandate to do so.

Bush senior modelled his public persona on John Wayne, perhaps his wayward son might start donning a cape and long johns for his public appearances.

STRIPPED BARE RECOMMENDS...

Every issue I'd like to plug a work you might not have heard of but really should seek out.

This time I'd like to draw your attention to *Terrible Sunrise* by Stan Martin, a historical graphic novel set during the Great War.

I don't think I've read anything that portrays the everyday human struggles, caught up in the huge historical forces of war, quite so effectively as *Terrible Sunrise*.

The writing and characterisation are extremely well observed and the art shows a dynamic simplicity of line that lends itself perfectly to the flawless period detail. It is a huge injustice that no large publisher has snatched this work up yet.

You would be well advised to obtain your copy from:

Betsy Heavens Comic Strip Company
40 Gloucester Street
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TERRIBLE ONES :: TIM PRATT

The Greek Chorus first appeared on Thursday night, as Zara lugged two paper bags full of groceries into the gravel public parking lot. The Chorus members wore tattered togas made from faintly flower-patterned, oft-washed bedsheets, and their faces were painted white with greasepaint.

Since she was in Berkeley, Zara assumed the Chorus members were performance artists of some kind, and didn't pay much attention when they drifted from out of the bushes and among the parked cars to stand in a loose semi-circle a few feet behind her. As she unlocked her trunk and wedged the grocery bags between a box of mismatched shoes and a broken lamp she'd never gotten around to throwing out, the Chorus said – in a single voice, from many throats – "Crazed with rapture, she sings and trills, dark bird that loves the night." The line sounded familiar – Zara was an actress, and she'd done several classical plays – but she couldn't quite place it.

Zara straightened, slammed her trunk, and looked at the Chorus. The fading light and white make-up smeared their faces into blank anonymities. They might have been looking at her expectantly. "Fuck off," she said. "You're in my way."

One of the Chorus members cupped his ear theatrically. "What did you say? Never mind, I heard – as I hear your destiny. Weeping, cacophony, cries that assault the ear."

Zara got into her car, locked the doors, and threw it into reverse. The Chorus scattered like pigeons making way for a bus. Once she'd backed past them, they reformed in front of her car, and their eyes shone in her headlights. She flipped up the high beams, and they shielded their faces from the brightness. Zara turned the wheel and drove away, leaving the Chorus to stand in the cloud of dust her wheels threw up from the gravel.

The Furies were old in those days. Alecto, Tisiphone, and Megaera lived together in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco, in an apartment building decorated with chipped carvings of lizards, between a strip club and a three-story liquor/erotic book store combination. Sometimes they became confused and lived for a while, cuckoo-style, in someone else's home. The rightful residents would go on drunken benders, or crack their skulls on curbs, or suffer hysterical blindness – whatever the specific cause, the effect was ignorance of the presence of the Furies in their midst. Eventually, inevitably, the ladies would look around and realize they'd been sleeping in strange beds, eating someone else's saltines and vanilla wafers, and they would leave, allowing the people they'd disrupted to recover their senses and resume their lives. Those intruded upon by the Furies in this way tended to throw open their windows and bundle their sheets down to the laundromat, for the ladies left a smell of dried blood and rancid olive oil behind when they departed.

Alecto was the most practical of the three. She did the shopping and kept the ants out of the kitchen. Megaera muttered darkly to herself, and walked the streets at night, hoping to be attacked – all she wanted was an excuse to do violence in self-defense. But in a place where murders were commonplace, no one ever threatened Megaera, who shuffled along in her housecoat until dawn. Tisiphone tended to stay closer to home. She went down the stairs fifteen or twenty times a day to check their brass-and-glass mailbox in the lobby, even on Sundays, though they never got anything other than take-out restaurant menus and pamphlets from upstart religions. Once, years before, when they were more self-aware, they received a jury-duty notice, addressed to the apartment's previous occupant. The ladies had a good laugh over that.

One day, while Alecto stood dropping dried scorpions and seahorses into a pot of boiling water on the stove, and Megaera sat staring out the window at the drug dealers and college students thronging the sidewalk, Tisiphone went down the creaking stairs to their mailbox. She opened the box with a tarnished key, and inside found a thick piece of parchment, folded in thirds, sealed with a dollop of red wax. The symbol embossed in the wax was a monstrous face, mouth gaping; an oracle's face.

Tisiphone broke the seal and opened the parchment. It was what she'd been waiting for, what they'd all been waiting for. A letter of commission.

Weeping a little, for reasons she could not have fully named, for happiness and anxiety and simply because the worn-down gears in her mind refused to mesh properly anymore, Tisiphone went back up the stairs, clutching the parchment, afraid it would disappear or transform into a Thai restaurant menu. She had to tell Alecto and Megaera. They had to prepare.

Zara got home, and kicked off her shoes, and hurriedly put her groceries away. She only had a few moments to eat before leaving for rehearsal. The red light on her answering machine blinked at a seizure-inducing rate. There were so many messages since this morning that even the machine appeared to have lost count. She pushed the button on her way to the kitchen, and Doug's voice emerged from the tinny speakers, calm and rational, a financial analyst's voice, saying, "I need you to beat me with a bamboo cane," and "I need you to plug my ass and lash me bloody." One message after another, a continuous litany – whenever the machine cut him off, he just called back and resumed his patient pleading. Zara rooted through her fridge for mold-free cheese, and cursed as she listened – this was the second day he'd called, and apparently he wasn't going to give up easily.

One of those assholes at the club must have given Doug her home number, probably for a substantial bribe. At least he wasn't calling her cell phone. She wondered, briefly, if he had her address, if she should worry. But if he showed up here, she could play along, get him naked and tied up, then shove him out in the hall, or call the cops, or try to reach his

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY PHIL WRIGGLESWORTH

wife – surely someone like Doug, middle-management pillar of the financial district, would have a wife, someone who wouldn't approve of him going to clubs like Damien's Basement, or of his more expensive private play-partners, like that of her own summer-job persona, Mistress Zara.

Mistress Zara was just a role she played, no different than Ophelia, Medea, or Blanche Dubois – though she did enjoy whipping assholes like Doug, she had to admit, and it paid better than temping. She'd made enough money working at Damien's over the summer to concentrate on theater for the rest of the year. At the time, it seemed like the perfect job. She hadn't realized Doug would get so attached. He didn't understand that their relationship, such as it was, stopped when she put down the whip. She'd have to do something about him, eventually – get one of her big, tattooed friends to pay him a visit at work and tell him to fuck off, for instance – but she didn't have time to worry about it right now. Final dress rehearsal was tonight, and the show opened tomorrow.

Zara ate a cheese-and-wheat-bread sandwich while standing up at the counter, followed it with a gulp of lowfat milk, grabbed her bag, and slipped out of the apartment, with Doug still droning on her machine about how he *needed* her, she *owed* him, they had a *connection*.

In the empty apartment, a new voice spoke from the machine, another message hidden among Doug's. It was a woman's voice, smoky, throaty, like a torch-singer past her prime. "I know you won't hear this, Zara, but I've got to give you warning, and this counts, by the rules. There are three old ladies coming to see your play tomorrow night, and they're harsh critics. Maybe you should let your understudy play the lead. There. Advice dispensed. Nice and fair."

A click, and then it was Doug again, demanding all the torments he thought Zara owed him.

Zara ran to catch the BART train from the East Bay into San Francisco, thinking briefly that if Doug saw her dressed like this (in running shoes, a T-shirt, and loose cotton pants) instead of a leather corset, knee-high boots, and several silver piercings, it would help disabuse him of his illusions about their relationship. She went into the tiled, brightly-lit station and headed for the escalator, only to encounter a blockade of scaffolding, sawhorses, and yellow tape – the escalator was closed. A crudely hand-lettered sign with an arrow directed her around the blockage. Cursing, sure she would miss her tarin, she followed the signs, walking along a passageway of covered scaffolding farther than seemed reasonable – was the train station really so *big*? – until finally reaching a stopped escalator that led, apparently, up to the platform for San Francisco-bound trains. She began to wish she'd driven, even though parking was nearly impossible in the part of the Mission where the theater was.

After she ran up the escalator, she found the platform wholly deserted. She said, "Fuck," because there should be *some* people waiting, even on a Thursday night, unless she'd just missed the train. Which meant she'd have to sprint for the theater to make rehearsal on time. She hated making people wait on her, because she knew what it was like, sitting around waiting for the lead actress, thinking what a bitch prima donna she was – Zara didn't want to be seen that way, not even by the cast of a little experimental theater that could only seat about fifty people, tops. She crossed her arms and looked out at the darkened overpass and the Oakland hills beyond the platform. Odd – there should have been lights from the houses on the ridges, but the hills were just dark shapes in the moonlight. Were they doing rolling blackouts again? And why was there no traffic on the overpass? Was it closed for repairs, too?

Then a train pulled in, surprising her – there had been no announcement of an oncoming train on the PA system. Still, it was headed in the right direction, so when the doors slid open she got on.

There was only one other passenger, sitting in one of the sideways-facing seats with a newspaper held open in front of her face. Zara dropped down into the seat opposite, glancing at the woman's newspaper. It was written in Greek, which she couldn't read, and Zara shifted her gaze to the blackness beyond the windows as the train slid away from the station.

The woman across from her tossed her newspaper onto the carpeted floor. "Nothing but bad news," she said in a smoky, throaty voice, smiling. The woman was in her forties, probably, dressed in a tailored black business suit, her hair blonde and stylishly short.

"Oh," Zara said, not really in the mood for conversation.

"I'm Nikki," the woman said.

Because it was going to be a long ride under the bay and into the city, she said, "I'm Zara."

"Good to meet you." Nikki crossed her legs. "I'm a talent scout."

"Oh?" Zara said, feeling a stir of interest. "Like for a record company?" She had lots of friends in bands, some of whom would happily sell out in a heartbeat.

"For an agency, actually. We represent musicians, dancers . . . actors. We're always on the lookout for new clients."

Zara didn't say anything. She was ambivalent about the very concept of agents. She was more interested in the art than the marketing, which perhaps meant she *needed* an agent; on the other hand, perhaps it meant she didn't need one at all. Agents might want her to do things like audition for commercials. They might want her to get a tan.

"Are you a performer?" Nikki asked.

"Sometimes," Zara said.

"Actress?"

Zara nodded. Nikki looked at her expectantly. "I'm playing the lead in *Medea*," Zara said. "It's a contemporary version, set in the suburbs, very minimalist, but with some almost Grand Guignol touches at the climax."

"It sounds fascinating," Nikki said, and she sounded like she meant it. Zara wondered that Nikki could sound sincere no matter what she actually felt – maybe from one moment to the next she didn't even *know* what she was feeling. That had to be part of her profession, right? Sociopathology as an occupational hazard. Except for a talent scout-slash-agent, it wouldn't *be* a hazard, but an advantage. As her friend Dave the unemployed programmer liked to say, "It's not a bug, it's a feature."

"It's a good role," Zara said.

"I'll come see it," Nikki said decisively. "Has it opened yet?"

"Opens tomorrow."

"Where?"

Zara told her the address.

"I'll be there," she said.

"Okay," Zara said, shrugging.

Nikki frowned, as if she'd expected something more – most young, hungry actors probably dropped to kiss her boots at the merest whiff of interest, Zara supposed.

"*Medea*," Nikki said. "That's the one about the woman who murders her children, right?"

"That's the one," Zara said.

"I wouldn't miss it for anything," Nikki said, more decisively. The train stopped, and the doors hissed open. Zara didn't recognize the platform – it was underground, with marble walls, Doric columns, and stone benches. She didn't see a sign anywhere – was it the 12th street station? If so, it had been extensively remodeled. It seems like she would've noticed that on another one of her trips. "See you," Nikki said, and left the train. The doors closed behind her, and the train pulled away into a dark tunnel.

Zara leaned her head back, against the window, and closed her eyes. It took twenty minutes or so to get from Oakland to the Mission, and she'd left home in such a hurry that she hadn't brought anything with her to read except her script, which she had down cold at this point, and didn't want to look at any more. She'd always been good at remembering lines. When she was really into a role, speaking her lines didn't even feel like recitation – it just felt like *talking*, saying what came naturally. That was her favorite feeling.

Someone coughed, and Zara opened her eyes and lifted her head. "Holy shit," she said.

The Greek Chorus was back – when had they gotten on the train? They must have come from another car, creeping quietly, sliding open the adjoining doors without a squeak. Or, more likely, Zara had fallen asleep, and just hadn't noticed them. They stood in the middle of the aisle, holding onto the grabrail above their heads, though there were any number of empty seats. They all stared at her, silently, swaying a little with the movement of the train.

Zara thought about getting up and going to another car, but what if they followed her? "This had better be a coincidence," she said. "We just happen to be going in the same direction, right? You aren't *following* me, are you?"

The Chorus did not answer, just looked at her. "So what are you, mimes? You were plenty talkative before. Or are you just frat boys?"

Still no response.

Zara snapped open her purse (black vinyl, decorated with little silvery skulls) and rummaged until she found a mostly used-up tube of lip balm. She held it between her thumb and forefinger, took aim, and threw it at one of the Chorus member's faces.

The tube bounced off his nose, and he squawked like a bird and flinched away.

"Just fuck off," Zara said.

"We've heard things," the Chorus said, hesitantly, half of them mumbling, none of them quite in synch. "But only from strangers. Those who carry messages have no power."

"So you've got a message for me, then?" Zara said. "What is this, guerilla marketing? Viral advertising? How much do you get paid?"

"Torrents of blood will fall from the sky. Justice brings new pain; on a fresh whetstone, Fate sharpens her sword. Each charge is countered by another, and who can fairly judge between them? Yet whoever acts must be punished. Such is the law."

"The only law you should be concerned with is the one against pissing me off," Zara said. "If you don't get away from me, I'm going to kick your asses, concurrently or sequentially, whichever you prefer."

The Chorus member in front, the one she'd hit with her lip balm, said, "Go on. My heart trembles with fear."

"Is that supposed to be sarcasm?" she asked.

The Chorus leader bowed his head. "We are old. You are young. You must teach us."

Before Zara could reply – or throw something else – the train slowed down. Glancing out the window, Zara saw the familiar brightly-tiled walls of the 16th Street Mission station, with people – *normal* people – milling around. "You assholes should be put to sleep," Zara said, and when the doors opened, she got off the train.

The Chorus didn't follow, but as she walked away, they called, "So you fall, abandoned, searching your heart for joy, but finding nothing – sucked dry, gnawed by monsters, a shell, a shadow, a – " Then the doors slid closed, and cut off their voices.

Halfway through the second act, Zara saw Doug poke his head through the door at the back of the theater, his expression unreadable at this distance. He came in and sat down in the back row as if he had every right in the world to be here, at a closed final dress rehearsal. So much for her hope that he hadn't penetrated the inner mysteries of her life – if he knew she was *here*, he knew as much about her as there was to know. She went on performing her scene with the actor playing Jason, deeply into the role of her suburbanite version of Medea. 'Her' kids – actually the director's, a boy and a girl seven and nine years old, remarkably well-behaved, practically raised in the theater – sat on the floor, the boy playing with dolls, the

girl with a dump truck. The gender-stereotype-reversal was just one of the writer/director's countless tiny little flourishes.

She imagined, briefly, that Jason was Doug, and her bitter lines took on a new level of heat, but she forced herself to dismiss the comparison. Why give Doug so much power? He was just a client with an over-active fantasy life, who somehow failed to comprehend that 'Mistress Zara' was nothing but invention. When the curtain came down on Act II, she'd tell one of the stage hands to get rid of him, and he'd be hustled away. Maybe she should think about calling the cops, or at least getting a restraining order.

But Zara didn't have the chance to do any of those things, because in the middle of a crucial monologue – the moment when Medea decides that the only solution to her problems is to murder and murder again – Doug rose from his place in the back row and came walking down the aisle. He was clearly fresh from work, dressed in a white shirt, dark tie, and slacks, his face handsome but a little doughy, poised somewhere between the end of baby-fat and the onset of middle-aged thickening – just another thirty-something member of the Gray Horde with a wider-than-average streak of kink. Zara didn't let her lines falter, even as Doug continued to approach the stage, even as the director stood up and said, "Hey, you can't be here," even as the children broke character completely and said, "Who's that guy?"

She continued her monologue as Doug climbed up on stage. He came up over the edge of the proscenium, just downstage of where she stood. His movements were clumsy and awkward, like a chubby kid hauling himself out of a swimming pool. "Mistress," he said, getting to his feet.

"How weak my heart must be," she said, still in character, "to be swayed by such pitiful pleas."

Doug frowned, then took out his wallet. He flipped it open, took out a sheaf of bills – fifties, mostly, it looked like – and threw them at Zara's feet. "There," he said. "Pre-paid through the end of the month. Now get out of that stupid dress and put on something *good*. I had a hard day, and I need you to make my night even harder."

Zara stared down at the money on the floor of the stage, her lines forgotten. The rest of the theater was silent, even the children. "You mother*fucker*," Zara said, looking up at him. "You think I'm a *whore*?"

Doug grinned. "I guess so. I guess you'll have to punish me for that."

Zara rushed at him, put both her hands on his chest, and shoved him. He shouted, arms pinwheeling, and almost fell off the state. He landed on his ass at the edge of the apron. "Get out of here," Zara said, through clenched teeth. "Never come near me again, you sick freak."

"*I'm* the sick freak?" Doug said, rising, wincing as he rubbed his ass. "At least I finish what I start." He nodded toward the stage floor. "You keep the money. I'll see you." Limping a little, he went down the steps and out of the theater.

There was silence for a moment after the door closed behind him. "Well," the director said finally. "Shall we take it up from the end of act two? Unless Zara has any other visitors . . . ?"

The other actors laughed, a little tensely, and Zara squeezed her hands into fists. The story of *this* would spread all over – theater people loved to gossip. By next week everyone would think she was a prostitute, when the truth was she'd never even *touched* any of her clients, not skin on skin, let along had sex with them. She'd just wielded the whip, or the crop, and prodded with latex-gloved hands, and talked the talk. It was just *acting*, but it would get all twisted around into something else in the stories. Now when the other actors looked at her, they wouldn't see Medea, they would see Zara, with the crazy john/boyfriend/whatever, with a wad of crumpled money at her feet. Doug had ruined the role for her, tainted the experience.

Well, fuck that. He was going to *pay*.

"Are you ready, Zara?" the director said.

"Yeah," she said. She kicked the money offstage. Let someone else have it.

Late that night, after the director wished them luck and Zara showered off the fake blood, she went in search of her revenge. Rodney, the doorman at Damien's Basement, refused at first, but Zara wouldn't let it go. "I know you gave that son of a bitch *my* phone number," she said. "So you can damn well give me his last name."

"He paid me," Rodney said sullenly.

"Yeah? I'll pay you by not telling Damien and getting your ass *fired*," she said.

"Shit," he said, but told her what she wanted to know.

Doug had mentioned the name of his company once or twice, in the awkward social moments before their sessions, and the same memory that made it so easy for Zara to retain her lines helped her remember where he worked. From that, it was short work on the internet to find an online directory for his company, complete with extension numbers for various employees. Humming a little – the thrill of vengeance, which probably wasn't much like what Medea felt, but it still made her feel connected to the character – Zara dialed the number for the company's vice-president. It was after midnight, so all she got was voice-mail, but that's what she wanted.

After the recorded greeting, and the beep, Zara said, "Doug Mitchell calling," and pressed the PLAY button on her digital answering machine. Doug's voice came on, rambling about the indignities he craved – cock-shaped gags, butt plugs,

floggings. He never mentioned her name, only said, "you": "I need you to," "I want you to," "You have to." Zara let the recording play for several minutes, over several messages. The she paused the playback, hung up, and dialed another number at Doug's company, this time the head of Human Relations, and repeated the process, introducing Doug and then letting his recording ramble. Then a woman's voice emerged from the answering machine, and Zara tried to stop the playback before the HR director's voicemail could record it. She accidentally hit the DELETE button, erasing the woman's message. The voice had sounded vaguely familiar, but Zara couldn't place it, and she hadn't heard more than the first few words. Ah, well. If it was important, she would call back. Zara hung up on that voicemail, and called another extension. Now her machine held nothing but Doug's messages, and she poured his litany into dozens of voicemail boxes at his company, eventually dialing extensions at random, until she was too exhausted to keep going.

Doug was going to have an interesting day at work tomorrow. Zara had worked as a temp often enough to know how the Gray Horde operated. They would play the messages for one another, put Doug's voice on speakerphone, argue over whether or not it was *really* him, and eventually decide it was, of course, it was. She'd been careful not to leave a message in Doug's own voicemail box. She wondered how long it would take him to figure out why everyone was laughing at him. This wouldn't exactly balance things between her and Doug, but maybe it would give him the idea that she wasn't someone to be fucked with, and that she could hurt him in ways that had nothing to do with catering to his masochistic side.

Zara stripped and crawled into bed near dawn, happy and content, suffused with Schadenfreude, definitely ready to play Medea the next night.

Their forms, the old-woman-shapes they'd worn for so long, rippled and fluttered, revealing blacker, more fundamental bodies beneath

She dreamed of women with brass wings; of singing stones; of bloody tears; of scorpions the size of lobsters, arrayed on serving platters; of old women, weeping inconsolably over child-sized coffins.

Zara made it into the city that night without incident, encountering no grease-painted strangers, no weird detours in the BART station, no sociopathic talent scouts. No Doug. He hadn't called, either, but maybe he was just afraid to leave more incriminating evidence on her answering machine. She went backstage and got help with her make-up, hair, and costume. She was keenly attuned to any differences in the way her fellow actors treated her since last night, but for the most part, they concentrated on their own preparations. She supposed they were whispering about her in corners, wondering how much she charged, but that might have been simple paranoia. She closed her eyes and took deep breaths, inhaling the faintly sweet, powdery scent of her own stage make-up. Paranoia was fine. Paranoia could be used in portraying Medea.

Before curtain, the director came to give them a little pep talk. "You know what they say," he said, not even glancing at Zara. "A terrible dress rehearsal means a fabulous opening night. If that's true, we've got nothing to worry about now." Everyone laughed, and a little piece of Zara turned to cinders and ash inside. Getting her revenge on Doug hadn't solved everything– it didn't change what he'd done to *her*. But revenge had enabled her to sleep well last night, so there was something to be said for it.

"There's a full house out there," the director said. "Even people standing in the back. Some of them aren't even my relatives! So let's go, folks. Break a few legs."

The play began, and Zara waited in the wings for her cue. The actress playing her nanny talked to the children on stage, saying, "Go to your rooms, little ones. Your mother's had a terrible time lately, and it's best you stay out of her way. I can see everything welling up behind her eyes – every injustice, every sorrow – and I'm afraid of what she might do when it becomes too much for her."

Zara began speaking her lines as she walked on stage: "Oh, misery! The things I've suffered! And you, my sweet children, you little shits, every time I look at you, I see your father!"

The Furies arrived late, having gotten lost on their way to the address given in their letter of commission – they only found their way at all because a well-dressed, smoky-voiced woman they met on the street offered to show them the way. After they arrived, the Furies stood on the pavement outside the building for a moment, gazing without understanding up at the lighted marquee, the cars on the street, the people laughing on the sidewalks. Their lives had been a haze of bitterness, impatience, and plodding-along for years piled upon years, and even as they'd moved through the city these past decades, they hadn't really *seen* their surroundings, living mostly in their memories and minds. Now they were marginally more conscious, able to converse, able to take in the contours of the modern world as more than a cascade of lights and noise. They huddled together before the glass doors briefly, taking strength from one another. It had been a long time since they'd gone forth on an errand of justice.

A man in a wrinkled white shirt and a dark tie walked past them, muttering, then turned and walked back, pacing, his hands balled into fists. "Fucking bitch," he said, "I'll kill you, bitch, you can't do this to me." He didn't notice the Furies, and they looked at one another knowingly. The man was a poison-sac about to burst. Perhaps, now that they were active again, they would have cause to punish him soon, if his rage

led him to transgress against those bound to him by marriage or blood.

"Inside, I suppose," Alecto said, and led the other two through the glass doors, into a vast room with red velvet walls, beneath a dusty crystal chandelier. The people standing behind glass counters and leaning on walls didn't notice the three of them at all, beyond slight headaches and sudden sweats.

Alecto looked around, frowning. "I've just thought. That woman, who showed us the way – how could she *see* us?"

"She didn't see us," Megaera snapped. "She saw three old ladies. What we need, the world provides. So it has always been. We needed direction, and she came."

"I'm just happy to be here," Tisiphone said. She paused, peering at the columns painted gold, the domed ceiling decorated with carved cherubs, all the faded opulence.

"Don't be *happy*," Megaera said. "We've been called, which can only mean blood, kin murdering kin, an affront to the gods, a cursed house. That shouldn't make you *happy*."

"I think we're old enough to be honest with ourselves," Alecto said soothingly. "We're *all* happy. I feel so . . . sharp tonight. Better than I have in ages."

"Hard work is good for the mind," Megaera said. "We've been idle too long."

"Where *is* that woman who showed us the way?" Tisiphone said. "I meant to thank her."

"We thanked her by not scooping out her eyes when she looked upon us," Megaera muttered.

"She seemed . . . familiar to me, as I think of it," Alecto said. She squinted around the lobby. "What *is* this place?"

"I thought someone said it was a theater," Tisiphone said, but she sounded unsure.

"Nonsense," Megaera said. "Theaters are *outside*." She gestured vaguely. "There are always . . . goats about. We used to go to the theater, and it was nothing like this."

"We used to be *in* the theater," Tisiphone said. "They used to have plays about *us*."

"Perhaps they will again, someday," Alecto said. "Come. We must find the murderess."

The ladies heard a collective gasp, beyond a set of double doors. They hurried forward, and threw the doors open.

A woman sat on a raised platform at the far end of the darkened room beyond, awash in a beam of white light. Gore clotted her hair, and blood streaked her arms. She cradled a pair of dead children, and stared up at the lights. She cried out: "Our children are dead! Surely that stings you!"

The ladies looked at one another and nodded. It was just what the letter of commission had told them to expect – a mother who murdered her children, in public, for revenge.

They linked arms. Their forms, the old-woman-shapes they'd worn for so long, rippled and fluttered, revealing blacker, more fundamental bodies beneath.

The Furies surged toward the stage.

During the penultimate scene, as Zara – as Medea – sat on stage with her dead children in her arms, everything went wrong. Zara was supposed to be under a single spotlight, but suddenly a dozen other stage lights came on, illuminating the blood-spattered wreckage of the suburban living-room set. She barely paused in her lines at first – the show must go on – but then the house lights came up, too, and she heard the keening from the back of the house, a high-pitched and strangely gleeful wail. The people in the audience should have turned around and looked back, craning their heads as Zara did to find the source of the noise, but they didn't move. In fact, they didn't move at *all* – they were perfectly still, even a man apparently just back from the bathroom, who hovered above his seat in the act of sitting down. Yet they weren't *frozen* – they trembled, and shifted slightly. It was like the moment in an improv exercise when the director calls 'Freeze' and everyone stops and holds whatever position they happen to be in.

"What the *fuck*?" Zara said, and let go of the children. They slid down to the stage, still holding their curled-up-to-her positions. Something was coming down the aisle, toward the stage, something like a black sheet blowing in the wind.

Zara stood up, and the Chorus stepped onto the stage, half from stage left, half from stage right. They arrayed themselves behind her in a semi-circle and said, "Poor woman, swept up by tragedy! Who will give you succor? You have been led into a forest of horrors."

The black shadow swooped up on stage, toward Zara, howling and laughing. Zara glimpsed shapes in the roiling blackness – wings, stones, coffins, eyes, talons, scorpions, whips, spears, flails. She brought her hands up before her face. A flash of pain seared her – the taste of glass and blood in her mouth, ball bearings in her bones, something with serrated teeth gnawing deep in her gut. She gasped, and doubled over –

– and the pain passed, leaving only the bare hint of a memory behind. Zara lowered her hands to see three old women standing before her, dressed in stained housecoats. One of the women was regal, with the face of a queen; she looked stunned. Another was pinch-faced and hunched-over, and she glowered. The last had disheveled hair, and fluttering hands, and seemed on the verge of tears. "What . . . what *happened*?" this last one said.

"Cast change," said a smoky voice from the audience. It was Nikki, the talent scout, dressed in a black tailored suit, rising from her seat in the front row.

"You showed us the way here," said the regal old woman. "You gave us directions."

"Oh, I had a lot to do with bringing us all together."

"Somebody better start talking," Zara said, crossing her arms. "You have absolutely fucked up my show, and there'd better be a good reason."

"Show?" said the pinch-faced woman.

"Yes," Nikki said, climbing the steps to the stage. "It's a *play*, ladies. About Medea."

"I remember Medea," the regal woman said. She looked at Zara. "This is no Medea."

"Very true," Nikki said, looking down at the children. She nudged the boy in the ribs with the toe of her stylish low-heeled boot. "They are not dead, but only sleeping."

"But what – " the disheveled one began.

The regal woman interrupted her. "I think I understand. We're being . . . retired. You sent the letter of commission. We've been tricked." She squinted. "And I think I know you. Daughter of chaos. Mother of death and sleep. Nyx."

"Nyx? The goddess of night shouldn't be *blonde*," the pinch-faced one said.

"Why would you trick us?" the fluttering woman cried.

Nikki snorted. "There was a time when you couldn't have *been* tricked, ladies."

"Okay, I'm out of here," Zara said. "I clearly walked in on the movie halfway through. You can fight it out amongst yourselves. I'm going to get this blood off me, because it itches when it dries."

"Zara," Nikki said, and it was a tone of voice Zara recognized – she'd used it herself, on Doug, during their sessions. "Stay." It was a voice meant to be obeyed. Quite against her will, Zara found herself standing still. "These women are . . . the kindly ones, they were called sometimes. The solemn ones. The – "

"The *Furies*?" Zara said. "The Erinyes? The terrible ones?"

At Nikki's look of surprise, Zara rolled her eyes. "I'm an actress, woman, remember? I've read the classics. Christ, I'm starring in motherfucking *Medea*, in case you hadn't noticed."

"Oedipus was the mother-fucking one," the disheveled old lady said, sounding pleased with herself. "Not Medea."

"Yes, well," Nikki said, glancing at the ladies, then turning her attention back to Zara. "The Furies are a force for vengeance. They punish those who kill their relatives. They saw you on stage, and thought you'd murdered your children, and tried to punish you. I imagine you felt the leading edge of that, hmm? But you *didn't* kill your children. By attempting to punish you unjustly, these kind ladies committed a serious transgression. By that mistake they proved themselves unfit to be the instruments of justice. In further fact – " and here she smiled, teeth as white as stars – "as the injured party, you now have the moral authority to punish them."

"We were deceived," the regal old woman said, voice shaking with barely-suppressed rage. "We were told there would be murder tonight. We behaved rashly, yes, without the care we once would have shown, but we are not solely culpable."

Zara looked at the old women, then back at Nikki, and began to laugh.

"You don't believe me," Nikki said, still sounding smug.

"Shit, no, I believe you," she said. "Everybody in the audience looks like they got touched while playing freeze tag, and these white-faced freaks in the Chorus have been following me since yesterday, making with the portents. I'd be crazy *not* to believe you. I'm laughing because you expect me to take over from the Furies. Sorry. Not a role I'm interested in."

"You don't have a choice," Nikki said. "The ladies got too old, too boring, and . . . certain parties . . . decided there needed to be a cast change. You got the part, Zara. I'm the greatest talent scout there ever was. You should thank me."

"What certain parties?" Zara said. "The gods? Didn't that woman say you were, what, the goddess of night? What gives you the right to fuck with me? Nobody even *believes* in those gods anymore."

Now Nikki laughed. She sat down, cross-legged, in a puddle of fake blood, heedless of dirtying her clothes. "Oh, Zara, really. I was born long before the gods, and I'm a child compared to the beings I work for. The gods are nothing. They were shat and belched and vomited up out of chaos, and that's where most of them have returned. The gods are just props – like these old ladies are, like you are, now. You're just part of the play. But who do you think *commissioned* the play? Who is the director of the play of the world, who is the producer of the universe? Those beings are the ones in charge, Zara. And the producers want you to take over as an avenging force in the world. These three women sprang from the blood of Uranus to avenge his murder. Uranus was killed by a family member, and the ladies took that as their guiding principle, and went on to punish other people for that same sin. And now *you're* vengeance personified. You can punish these women for *their* transgression."

Zara thought about the searing pain the Furies had inflicted on her so briefly. "So you're saying . . . I have power?"

"Yes," Nikki said. "Sometimes. When you have cause. The Furies only punished kin-killers. We're not yet sure what your specialty will be, but we're all very excited to find out." She glanced upward. "You know, some stories say I gave birth to the Furies – as I gave birth to pain, age, strife, and death – but it was never true. Until now. I feel something like a mother to you, now, Zara."

The house lights went down, and the stage lights, too, until there were only three spots – one on Nikki, one on the former Furies, one on Zara herself. Zara wasn't sure how, but she knew she was the one who'd made the lights change – her power was showing itself now, whether she liked it or not.

Nikki stood up and stepped away from her spotlight, into the dark. "*Now*," she said. "Punish them, Zara, for what they did to you."

The former Furies stood, their backs straight, their heads held high, waiting.

"No," Zara said. "I won't do it." The spotlight found Nikki again.

Nikki sighed. There was no fake blood on her clothes, though she'd been sitting in a pool of it. "You don't have any choice – "

"There is always a choice," the regal Fury said. "We forgave Orestes. We were the benevolent ones, for a time."

"Yeah," Zara said. "I can be benevolent."

Nikki pinched the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger, as if fighting a headache. "This isn't the way we meant things to go."

Zara slapped Nikki, hard, leaving a bloody smear across her cheek. The Chorus gasped and murmured. Nikki stared at her, eyes wide.

"This isn't a *play*," Zara said, suddenly overcome by the pressures of the past few days – Doug, the Chorus, rehearsal, and now *this*. "You aren't my director. I'm not going to say the lines you wrote. You need to learn to tell the difference between what's real and what's not, or you're going to be in for a hard time." She turned to the Furies and snapped her fingers. The light on them went out. "Go on," she said. "Show's over. You're forgiven."

Nikki rubbed her bloody cheek. "What, you think you saved them? They'll just get old and die like normal people, now."

"That's better than me killing them because of something *you* tricked them into doing," Zara said.

Shaking her head, Nikki smiled. "Oh, Zara. We're going to have a great time watching you. You're going to cut a swath, aren't you?"

"I don't want the part," Zara said.

"Sure," Nikki said. "Whatever you say. I've got to be going. You might want to pick up the children and go on with your lines – time's going to come flooding back in here in a moment. You can finish your little play, take your bows, and then move on to more important things. I'll see you around – but you won't see me." Nikki stepped out of the spotlight again, and when Zara mentally shifted the light to follow her, it illuminated only the bloody stage. Nikki, and the ladies, were gone.

Zara sank back down to her knees and gathered the children toward her. Getting back into the role of Medea for this last scene was going to be hell.

Zara begged off from the cast party, saying she wasn't feeling well, and after she'd cleaned up and changed into her street clothes, she left the theater by the side entrance. She had a lot of thinking to do. She didn't *feel* any different, didn't feel brimming with power. Maybe her life didn't have to change. Maybe she could just go on the way she'd always –

"Bitch," Doug said, stepping from behind a rusty trash container. "You called my office. You fucked with my life."

Zara moved toward him, fists clenched. "And what do you think you did to *my* life, you brainless prick?" she shouted.

Doug stumbled back, startled – clearly he'd run this scenario through in his head a few times, and it hadn't involved Zara being loud and aggressive. He rallied, though, and came toward her again. "I just wanted what you *owed* me. I paid you to perform a service, and you thought you could just stop, any time you wanted?"

"Yes, Doug, you moron. It was a *job*. I *quit*."

She wouldn't kill him, but there were other punishments. "You need to learn to recognize what's real, Doug," she said, her voice almost sad. "From now on, your life will be bathed in light and clarity"

"But we had a real connection," he said, sounding hurt, now. "I could tell by the way you acted with me that our sessions meant something to you, to both of us, by the way we synched up perfectly, anticipated one another's – "

"No," she said, not shouting now, just speaking quietly, and Doug fell silent. "No. I was acting. I'm an actress. It's not my fault if you can't tell the difference between a real connection and playing pretend."

"I'm sorry you feel that way," he said. "But you're lying to yourself. I'll make you understand." He reached into his pocket, and came out with a knife, a fancy one with a shining blade and a skeletal-frame steel hilt.

Zara narrowed her eyes. This was so . . . fucking . . . *melodramatic*.

A spotlight illuminated Doug, and he squeezed his eyes shut in the sudden brilliance. "What?" he said, bewildered, shading his face and looking up toward the source of the blinding white light – it was coming from the empty air.

Zara knew what to say. The words were there, in her head; the perfect words, the natural words, the ones that didn't feel like prepared lines at all. She wondered whether Nikki and her friends the producers had driven Doug crazy, set him on this path in order to bring about this confrontation, for their own entertainment.

Maybe so. But Doug was still an asshole, and he still had a lesson to learn. She wouldn't kill him, but there were other punishments. "You need to learn to recognize what's real, Doug," she said, her voice almost sad. "From now on, your life will be bathed in light and clarity. You'll never believe anything untrue again, and you'll never be able to tell untruths of your own, either. If you go to the movies, it will just be noise and flashing lights. If you go to the theater, it will just be people standing on a stage talking. Novels will be words on a page. You don't deserve to experience stories, Doug, because you can't handle the responsibility that stories involve." She waved her hand, and the spotlight went out.

Doug sat down in the alley. He whimpered. "I – I – " He fell silent, and dropped his knife, and covered his face with his hands, desperately trying to put the scales back on his eyes.

Zara walked out of the alley. Perhaps this was a role she could play after all. The Furies had lived to punish those who murdered their loved ones – that was the circumstance of their birth, after all. But Zara had gained her powers because some people couldn't tell the difference between what was real and what was only a story, and *those* were the kind of people she would punish. The world wasn't a stage, no matter what Shakespeare thought, no matter what Nikki and her producers believed. Zara wouldn't play the part they had in mind for her. She was going off book. She was going to *improvise*.

"Oh, Nikki," she said, and felt the night air tremble. "You fucked up, sister. It's my show, now."

As Zara walked out of the alley, a light, unseasonable rain began to fall. Once she was gone, the Greek Chorus emerged from behind garbage cans and piled boxes, to stand around Doug, who lay curled on the wet pavement.

"And so night fell," the Chorus said, "and the sky above the mountain of the gods was rent by a great light, and those above who penned the destiny of Earth and Heaven felt their hands tremble, and watched as blotted ink spread across the parchment in their hands, and wept to see their work undone." Then the Chorus stood, mouths half-open, as if unsure what to say next.

Their white make-up began to smear and run in the falling rain.

Tim lives in Oakland, California. His stories have appeared in *The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror*, *Strange Horizons*, and other nice places. His first collection, *Little Gods*, was published in November 2003 by Prime Books. Talk to him at www.ttapress.com/discus

Relics

illustrations: Rob Middleton

I took the flyer south along the coast, engine coughing on the dingy local fuel. I called it reconnoitring, this trip, though sightseeing was much nearer the mark. The seagulls wheeled around me, squawking in alarm, as if I were some giant, prehistoric bird of prey, the flyer's frame a skeleton touched magically to life. I frightened them; but as for me, I'd lost none of the thrill I always felt in flight. Red hills rose to a sky of polished blue, plunging as I banked, then shore and sand were rushing past and I was high above the ocean, watching the patterns on the water, great dark splotches of marine weed, white surf rolling over hidden rocks . . . Was this what I was looking for? A sign, a clue? The key to sunken treasure?

The wind pulled at my hair. The engine hummed and sputtered, hummed again. I swooped so low I could have stuck my feet out and gone walking on the wave-tops, if I'd wanted to.

The water wasn't giving anything away.

A hundred years ago, or so the story went, a starship had come down here. Crashed, sunk, and never been recovered. Too far off the beaten track, too many better pickings elsewhere in the world. The thing was there, alright, I'd had my proof of that; exactly where, though – that was anybody's guess.

I circled, and the sea rose like a wall beside me. Tiny islands floated in the mid-day glare. The water wasn't deep here. Only deep enough.

I turned inland, riding the air over the cliff tops. A solitary goatherd watched me, flock stirring as I dropped towards him. I waved. He didn't move. Faintly annoyed, I swooped in low, scattering the animals, yelling out over the engine noise, but the man stayed stock still, like a statue caught in time. I spun over his head, taunting him, then swung around and sped off north.

It's fitting that Tim should appear in at least one of our tenth anniversary issues as he's now published seven stories here since his first, 'The God House', appeared in TTA12. He has also a contributed some filmmaker profiles, interviews, reviews and more recently an occasional round-up of graphic novels.

Tim Lees

My base town, G__, was so small that it only featured on the map out of default; without it, the whole coast would have been blank for miles. Two low horns of buildings jutted round a harbour far too large for the few fishing boats it held; even the water seemed peculiarly slack and tired, with the tranquillity of absolute old age. Dilapidation was the keynote, houses fixed up with whatever came to hand, including sections of a disused oil refinery a few miles downshore; curved sheets of steel, shining where they hugged the old stone walls and wooden roofs. It gave the place a jumbled, quaint sort of a look, more like a scrapyard than a village; and privately I'd long ago re-christened it 'the Garbage Heap'.

I buzzed the quayside, caught a look from the old men outside the bar, then lifted up over the rooftops to the field where I habitually parked. By the time I landed, half the village children had come out to welcome me. And by the water pump, still some way off, stood Julia.

Her height, her colouring, the way she moved, all marked her out from those around. A passing sailor, merchant or whatever, far off in her ancestry, might have accounted for her looks. Her moods weren't quite so easy to explain. Why now, when I expected her to run to me, did she hang back, sullen, making me push my way through these excited, dark-skinned kids, smiling, nodding, pretending to be charmed, and all the time, intent on her?

Under the glaring summer light, her eyes were blue, bright silver-blue: eyes like the sky.

They didn't look at me.

"So you came back," she said.

"Course I came back! What d'you think?"

I went to clasp her hand, but she folded her arms, and it wasn't till the evening that her glum phase lifted, and she smiled, and snuggled up, as if it had been she, not I, who'd been away.

We lived together all that summer, in my little rented room above the quay. I was the village curiosity, the one old women peeped at from their shadowed rooms, and gossiped over in their own strange, hybrid tongue – or so I fancied, anyway. Yet when I'd first arrived I'd no intention to stay on, not for a day, a night, not even for a single afternoon.

Meeting Julia had changed all that.

I scarcely thought of us as lovers then. I'd never been at ease with women – not the girls back home, at any rate – but Julia, with her quiet, cat-like presence, comical pronunciation, and her table manners which would frankly have appalled my parents – she soon helped me relax. She put up with my nervousness, my fumbling at her body, my clumsy efforts to be 'passionate', all with a patience which in any other context would have credited a saint. Even when she laughed at me, or tenderly corrected one of my more amateur caresses, there was never any malice in her – none of that jockeying for status I'd so often seen in couples back at home. The thinness of my arms amused her, and the softness of my hands and feet ("Like a bambino!" she would cry). Her own hands were as tough as crabs, but sensitive enough; I'll vouch for that.

I liked to watch her in the morning, making breakfast, washing in the bucket by the window, delighting in her looks, those high, steep cheek bones, tapered chin, and most of all her eyes, which in the daylight would be icy blue, yet other times reflected almost any colour you could dream of – silver mirrors, meant to hide, not to reveal. I only knew one other person who had eyes like that, and in him, although they fascinated still, they made me wary, too.

I was eighteen then. I'd fled from home, its nagging pressure of careers, exams, the need to get a 'good' job, meet the 'right' people . . . But she knew nothing about that. I'd try to talk to her, and watch her eyes glaze over, fingers start to fidget. Such things weren't even relevant to her. She'd want to eat, or sleep, make love, or talk about her father's latest exploits. Or show me what she'd brought back from the far bays, across the headland, which she visited from time to time, and which gave her the small income that she had.

She found amazing objects on the beach – alien artifacts, smashed fragments, pieces of machinery – then sold them for a pittance to a trader who came by once a month or so. I told her she was being robbed. She ought to save her finds and take them to the city, sell them there herself, I said. She only shrugged. Life wasn't lived like that. It wasn't done. My efforts to bring enterprise into her tiny world were met with sceptical dismissal. Habit – tradition – was the keynote here. Lose that, she seemed to say, and life would fall apart. Lose that, your dignity went, too.

I'd yet to understand just how much dignity she really had.

Her mother had died, ten years earlier, of something she called 'fever'. Her father lived a few miles out of town, on one of the old dirt roads that festooned the hills. He owned some sheep, some goats, he did a little fishing, but the main thing that he liked was getting paralytic drunk, then weeping sentimentally about the past. The first time that we met he greeted me as if I were a long-lost son. He grasped my hand in his big, horny palm and kept repeating the few English words he knew: "Hello!" – "Bye-bye!" – "Good!" – "London!". Under the rolls of fat, the sunburned lines, I still saw traces of the same high cheek bones that I knew so well in Julia, although the eyes were dull, like stones. I saw the family as echoes of her, clumsy mirror-images; and yet her sisters hardly looked like her at all. Only the brother, Juan, was truly of her type – so much so, that, for weeks, I thought they must be twins. His forehead was as broad, his eyes the same bright, liquid silver, and I hoped that I'd become his friend, as if my closeness to his sister would extend to him, as well.

This didn't happen. Rather, he shunned me.

He was the only one among the family who sat apart, like a mistrustful elf, or took my visits as a cue to get on with his farm chores. I tried to show my good intentions, calling out, "Hi, Juan," each time I saw him, but he'd only scowl or turn his back.

Did he resent my being there? Imagine I'd besmirched his sister's honour, say? If so, as I knew even then, I can't have been the first. And would he want some terrible revenge?

Such fantasies were foolish, though. He'd never go against his sister's wishes. As eldest, she'd assumed her mother's

role, ruling the family like some stern, benevolent dictator, and nobody – not Juan, her father or her sisters – would even once have dared offend her. That, at least, was plain.

Their poverty seemed quaint and picturesque at first. I loved the smoky little cottage where they crowded with their hens and goats, three rooms for a family of five. It was a lark for me, to squat there on the earthen floor. I couldn't even dream of how it must be through the long, drab winter months, in rooms lit intermittently by oil lamps, cold and draughty, never any privacy . . . No wonder Julia had come to live with me.

I told her I was short of money. Already I was worried by the cost of fuel. I don't think she believed me – all foreigners had money, after all, and by her standards, I must have been a wealthy man – but, after some confusion, she seemed willing to accept whatever game I might be playing, and to play along.

"I know how to make money," she announced, and soon was making plans which privately I thought were ludicrous, but didn't have the heart to stop.

She roused me in the pre-dawn light. She forced hot coffee down me, waited while I dressed, and then, on foot, we left the town, walked up over the headland – a long walk, three hours and more. She moved with an extraordinary speed, chasing the goat tracks, and more than once I had to call for her to wait. My ankles were soon scratched and bleeding, scraped by thorns and harsh grass. Downhill was worse than up. Once, I slipped and fell, scraping a few yards down the hillside; in a moment, she was with me, though her concern soon turned to laughter when she saw I wasn't hurt.

"You!" she chided. "City boy!"

I grew irritable, sullen. So much of our relationship was founded on my own sense of superiority, the fact I came from somewhere far, far richer, more advanced than she. I could afford to visit her, but she could never, never visit me . . .

All it took was just an early morning walk to show how frail such notions really were.

I sulked for the remainder of the trip – though not so much I missed the beauty of my first sight of the bay. We topped a rise and there it was before us, a great sheet of sea, all grey, and at the same moment we saw it, so the sun began to rise.

It came up from the waters, tiny, like a pomegranate seed, bright and moving almost visibly, so that my hurt pride, bruised knees and bleeding legs were banished for a moment from my mind. Watching the sea turn pinky-grey, the sun ascending on a spear of light, once more I tried to picture the old ship, concealed under the water, crusted, covered up in weed . . . Not here, perhaps, but far out, on the horizon, prey to tides and currents, long lost and far from home . . .

And thinking of it, I was reminded how far I, too, was from home, and felt that early morning sadness come upon me, a fear that I might somehow die in this forsaken place, news of my death unknown to either family or friends . . .

She called to me. She was a hundred feet below, nimble as a lizard, the empty canvas bag she carried draped across her back. "On! On!" she called. "What's stopping you?"

Cautiously, I set off after her. I wished I'd brought a camera – wished I owned a camera, as if in one small picture I could hold this mood, this sense of melancholy which, in some peculiar self-indulgent way, I realised I enjoyed.

Instinct guided her. I never understood what signs she looked for, how she chose her days, her hunting grounds. We picked our way among the pools and shoes in hand, she danced from rock to rock, light as could be. It took her twenty minutes. Then she yelled out, "Yah!"

I peered into the black silt of the pool bottom. Saw nothing. A swarm of tiny fish swept through the water. Then she knelt, plunged in her hand, and brought up treasure.

It didn't look like treasure. Not at first.

It was a strip, long as her forearm, slightly curved; black with dirt, a slimy seaweed streamer hanging from it.

"There," she said, and held it close up to her face, scratching at it with a thumbnail. She let me see the glint of silver, shining filigree beneath the muck.

"How did you . . . ?"

She shrugged, secretive.

"It doesn't look like anything. How did you see it? How . . . ?"

Two more pieces she produced that day – perhaps two portions of a single thing. Small cylinders, a little thicker than a pencil, one long as my hand, the other smaller. These, too, seemed near invisible among the debris of the pool bottom, yet she went quickly to them, guided by some curious affinity.

She dropped them in her bag. And we went home.

The sun was falling as we came back into town. Over the harbour now, the low, square houses at the promontory's tip were sliced with golden light. Shadows swallowed up the rest. I was tired, scarcely even watching where I went.

I didn't see him, waiting for us. Not till she suddenly cried out and ran ahead.

Juan. My heart sank at the sight of him; not that I feared or even much disliked him, but I was tired and I resented his intrusion here, on what I saw as my home ground. He and Julia began to talk immediately, in hushed tones. As I came near, he seemed to glower at me. "Hi, Juan," I said. He gave a nod. Under his dark brows, his strange eyes almost matched the last gold tips of sunlight on the buildings opposite.

I climbed the outside stairway to my room. At the top, I waited. I could see them, talking in an agitated way, but couldn't understand. She shook her head, as if forbidding something. I was hungry. I wished he'd clear off, go home and leave us on our own. But when he did, it seemed to have left ill-feeling between him and his sister. I asked her what was wrong – bad news about her father, say? – but she said, no, no, her father was just fine, the family was well.

"Your brother doesn't like me very much."

"Juan?"

"Who else d'you think I mean?"

But she placed her hand upon my arm, squeezed hard. "Juan likes you very, very much," she said. "Do not forget."

We made love that night, as was our custom, the tiredness of our bodies giving the act a dreamlike quality, urgent yet detached, as if we watched ourselves; and when she came, she cried out – so loudly I was worried that my hosts, down in the room below, might come up and complain.

I woke in darkness, and instead of trying to sleep again, I got up, looked out across the harbour, and then up, towards the stars – thousands and thousands of them, unfogged here by pollution or a hint of cloud, the Milky Way a great jewelled river leading God knows where.

And if the stars made up a river, I was standing in its smallest, most forgotten backwater; a ragged little town, here on a planet nobody had bothered with in well over a century.

For twenty years, the aliens had visited our world, had come and gone in all their countless species and designs; had used us as a way station, a home-from-home – even today, their weird 'environments', great geodesic domes, lay scattered over every continent on Earth, each with its set conditions, suitable for this creature or that; now slowly rotting, weakened by the sunlight and the rain, the hostile airs of Earth. Impressive as they were, they hadn't lasted half the time of those crude steel edifices the Victorians put up. But then, as we knew now, they hadn't been intended to.

The aliens' technology had left us flattened, spiritually prostrated by their miracles. We'd marvelled like a backwoods tribe presented with a string of beads, we'd thought the aliens our benefactors, wonder-workers, saviours from the stars. And what did they care, if we'd cadged a few discarded gadgets, picked up a small smattering of knowledge – enough to keep our physicists awake for weeks, plotting the new trajectories of their careers, enough to make the multinationals all drool with hunger . . . Oh, but that was nothing. Throwaways. They kept their greatest secrets from us, I've no doubt. They gave us just a taste.

And then they disappeared. No explanations. No announcements. One day, the last ship left; and people waited for the next. It never came.

It was as if they'd all, those diverse creatures, suddenly lost interest in our little portion of the universe. As if we'd fallen out of fashion. We'd had the arrogance to see ourselves as colleagues, allies. But they'd left without a backward glance.

The gifts that still remained, we'd put to use, and for a time, it seemed their legacy would be a beautiful, Edenic world, a place where – as in some Nineteenth Century fantasy – science really would solve all man's ills.

And yet it was a science it might take millennia to understand. Too much seemed burdened with a built-in obsolescence, like cheap goods left us by a richer and more careless race. Machines wore out. Others relied on elements we simply did not have – and could not synthesise.

Perhaps it was deliberate.

It was notable that, in spite of questioning, the aliens had never shared the secrets of their space flight. Like tourists, they would give us gifts, but wanted us, essentially, to go on just as they first found us – quaint, primitive and charming.

Much of the trouble now in the industrialised world was simply recoil from those boom years – the forced attempt to re-adjust to the technology our forefathers had known. We had become like cargo cultists, propped up by the debris of another's industry; or millinarians, scanning the skies for signs our saviours might return.

Perhaps they would. Who knew? A century must seem like nothing to them, like they'd just stepped out the door.

I thought about the ship under the water. One of countless relics, littering the world, like all the rusting hulks of cars, the broken washing machines, and old, dumped armchairs that I'd seen along the roadside in my travels. An accident, a piece of tragic carelessness . . .

Were the aliens mere tourists, then? Moving on as trends and crazes changed? It was a tempting thought, but one that didn't fit. It was like reading human motives into animals – no, stranger: into clouds, or trees. The aliens weren't in the least like us. The little lemur creatures had been vaguely recognisable, almost cute; and they'd been popular as a result. I'd seen films of them. But there were others – creatures who could only be described in terms of mathematics, who defied the eye and warped the senses with their presence. Tourists? Not in the sense I understood, at any rate . . .

We made love in the morning, too.

She worked on me, using her fingers and her mouth, her body twisting like a snake. I dreamed she'd swallow me, absorb me utterly, make me a part of her . . . A frightening, delicious feeling, like sitting in the front seat of the roller coaster.

And when she'd finished, she went straight to her latest artifact, the silver filigree, and held it high up in the sunlight, so it caught the rays and shone.

"Look!" she cried, then, "Beautiful! Beautiful!"

We found other relics, too, as weeks went by – or she did, anyway. I trudged behind, watching the ground and seeing nothing. It was her, all her. If there was anything to find, she'd find it, eyes as sharp as needles. I made plans to take our treasure trove up north, to find an honest dealer, get a decent price. That's if I could.

And yet there came a time my interest in the project waned. I couldn't help it; it was more a loss of faith than anything. It had been her idea, not mine. Perhaps I'd wanted instant riches, or thought we'd come back from the bay loaded with treasure, rather than these piecemeal relics slowly gathering around us. I was impatient. I looked up at the stars at night, and felt some wonder at the clutter of exotic items we'd amassed, but I no longer saw our fortune there. I no longer believed.

From time to time, I noticed a few clouds pass through the sky, perhaps the harbingers of Julia's much longed-for storm, the tempest which would fill the beaches with fresh plunder. One thing they did remind me of: the season was about to change.

I went to check the flyer. It was sheltered by tarpaulin. The fuel was scarce, the servicing entirely amateur. I reckoned it would take me north just one more time before it had to have a thorough overhaul. Meanwhile, I did my best to keep it clean and shield it from the elements.

The future raced towards me now, after the long, still summer; born on those first few clouds, the cooling breeze that drifted from the mountains, stirring the waves into a frenzy as they battered on the shore.

It was a climate of extremes. The wind and rain were fierce in winter, so the locals said. Snow on the mountains. I'd been

surprised, when I'd heard that, but now I could believe it. I began to see just how unwelcoming the place must be in winter, cut off from the world . . . And what did people eat? I'd read how, in the Middle Ages, winter would mean stored food, resulting in all kinds of vitamin deficiencies; then people would go mad, see visions, suffer religious fits and hypochondria . . . Suppose that happened here? To me, and those around?

In some part of myself I knew that if I went back to the city, I'd never come back here. It would be much too easy to go on, go somewhere else; too easy to go home.

Julia, as if she sensed my restlessness, tried hard to please. She bought an octopus and simmered it for hours in a stew of herbs, until the flesh was tender and delicious. More than ever, she initiated lovemaking, finding new games, tending to my wants. Yet all the while, unknowingly, she worked against herself. I grew selfish. It was easier, these days, to satisfy my own needs, scarcely bothering with hers. Our love-making was frequent, yes, but it was often brief. I don't mean that I cared for her the less. Just that the novelty, the rush of joy we'd had, was gone, and I was unsure what, if anything, replaced it. When our affair began, she'd occupied my thoughts both day and night. Now there were other matters claiming my attention, many far more strongly than did she.

One night a wind came up. It rattled at the shutters, and a door banged intermittently, and she hugged me and she whispered in my ear, "Good finds tomorrow! Good finds!"

I never made it to the bay that morning. Crapulous, hung over from the local wine, I told her, "You go – I'll come later."

It was after ten when I woke properly.

My head felt thick. I was alone. I made a coffee, very sweet, and drank it painfully. I downed a pint of water. Then I pushed the shutters back. The light was hard, corrosive, and it shattered on the harbour in a way that hurt my eyes. I told myself she didn't need me in the bay, and wondered why I ever went; I was her porter, nothing more. And I saw then what I should have seen so long ago: that I was just a foreigner, a summer guest, and all my talk of staying on was no more than a sham. I couldn't live in her world, any more than she could live in mine – or, I thought, would want to.

Hangovers are lethal to your self-esteem. But sometimes, in that glazed and almost ego-less condition, you see things with a clarity unknown at any other time.

I fumbled for my cigarettes, lit up, and heard a faint tap at the door. Ignored it. But it came again: *tap-tap, tap-tap . . .*

Her brother stood there. Juan. He hunched up slightly when he saw me, ducked his head in a peculiar, self-deprecating way, and peered at me with sharp, bright eyes.

He was different, here alone; awkward, uncertain of himself, without his sister's presence. His gaze moved round the room, lingered for a moment on the bed, then longer on the pile of artifacts laid out across the floor.

"She's at the bay," I said. "She won't be back for hours . . . "

Yet I knew already that it wasn't Julia he'd come to see.

I made fresh coffee and he took it, still without a word. His lips peeled back in what was meant to be a smile. Once more he glanced down at the artifacts. I told him, "Go ahead."

It was a strange thing. I'd seen Juan many times these last few weeks. He'd struck me as a sullen, graceless creature, and his similarities to Julia lacked both her intelligence and wit. Yet now a change seemed to come over him. He squatted on his heels and picked up each object in turn, held it, moved it in the light, ran his fingers over it as if his horny, calloused hands became as sensitive as the most expert jewelsmith's. I watched, almost against my will, so struck now by his transformation. For minutes, he seemed totally absorbed. It was as if all other matters – myself, the room, even the town itself – had faded from his mind.

The last objects he came to were the two dull rods, the fragments we'd brought back that first day, and he picked the longer one, examined it a moment. Then he gripped it in his fist and squeezed it, rhythmically. He stood up, gestured me to pull the shutters closed.

The room in shadow now, he held the rod between his thumb and forefinger. With his other hand, he made a pass around it, like a stage magician, intricate, precise; I seemed to see an after-image where his fingers moved, a geometric web that flickered for a half a second in the air, too complex fully to recall.

Next, he touched the tip quite lightly with his forefinger. A tiny, purple light appeared. He moved his finger gently down the rod, from end to end. The small spark followed it. It seemed to be inside, somehow, enclosed within the darker matter, like a firefly in a jar. I stared at it. The rod was just as solid as before, opaque as polished stone. It made no sense.

He grinned. Not the forced smile of his greeting, but a real, wide, gap-toothed grin – a look of sheer delight. He ran his finger back and forth, the small light trailing it. Wonder of wonders. Miracle of miracles.

And then it dimmed. It took a second or two, fading like an ember. Disappeared.

The rod was grey, inert again, just as we'd found it.

"No good." He held the end out so that I could see. "Broken," he said.

I agreed; what else was I supposed to say? I asked him how he'd done it, what he'd done, but he just looked away, as if it were a minor matter, much too modest to discuss.

"You've seen these things before," I said.

He grinned then, proudly.

"You know what they were used for?"

"In the ship," he said. "A engine. Or . . . " He fumbled for the word. "A instrument."

"You know about the ship? You know where it was from? Who brought it here?"

Again, I got a vague response, a quick, dismissive shrug that might mean anything; but what I thought it meant was, "No, I don't know – but I don't mind you thinking I do."

He put the rod back on the floor, sat down. I made more coffee, pushed the shutters back. I said, "You know what they were like – the people on the ship? The aliens? Has anything washed up? A picture, maybe, or, or – " 'a body', I'd been going to say, but stopped myself. "Something like that?"

He laughed. "Spacemen," he said. "Big monsters. Many tentacles. Big teeth!" He pulled a face, sucking his cheeks in, waving his arms around. "Monsters. Eat everyone!"

I looked down at the artifacts, the silver filigree, those other items, all their strength, their delicacy.

"No," I said. "I don't think they were monsters . . . "

"All dead," he went on. "Ship come down – crash into sea." He mimed it with his hand, coming in too steeply, swerving now over the water . . . Again, I had the strange impression of precise geometry, as if in some way he were plotting an exact trajectory, the very angle of their flight, repeated here in miniature. He made the motion several times. "Boom," he said. "Boom, boom."

I sat down on the bed, keeping my face out of the sun. My head still ached. "Well," I said, "maybe Julia'll bring something back this time. She's waiting for a storm . . . " I nodded to the window. "Won't get one today, though."

Juan sat, legs together, elbows resting on his knees, his fingers interlinked and fidgeting. Then – quickly, as if it took him nerve to ask – he said, "You marry Julia?"

The question startled me. "Oh, well, I, I don't know – and it's up to her . . . "

"You marry Julia." No query now; nor any threat. He leaned towards me, offering advice. "She very good. Smart, up here." He tapped his head. "She give you children." He smiled, marking their heights out with his hand: a little one, a bigger one, and one as tall as he was, sitting down. He didn't realise that, if any image could have put me off, it was the picture of his sister, transformed into some peasant-hipped brood-mare, another baby-factory like the women on the quayside, waiting for their husbands to come home. My rural idyll was a strictly adolescent one; it didn't involve families.

He said, "You stay. You make much money here." I shrugged. He frowned. "You have money, yes?"

"Not a bean," I said. He looked confused. I told him, "No."

He contradicted me. "You have money. Yes. You have money, or your father, or your mother. You bring money here. Many men. You make more money. Me – I show you how."

"So how's that, Juan?"

"I show. But – need boats. Many thing." He mimed, an odd gesture I couldn't place.

"Fishing rods?" I said.

"No – big – big."

"Winches? Cranes?"

"Yes. Cranes. Need cranes. Boats. Men – " he made a diving

motion – "in the water. The ship . . . " He held his hand out, flat, close to the floor. Then, face creased, mimicking the strain, he raised it slowly, stiffly to the level of his eyes.

He grinned at me.

"You're joking, Juan. You want to raise the ship? It's probably not even in one piece. And if it was worth doing, they'd have done it long ago . . . "

"One piece," he echoed. "Yes. We can fly. One piece."

He moved his hand around, like a child playing at aeroplanes, though there was nothing childish in his face; it was a look of fierce intensity, something startling: the look of a fanatic.

I'd once believed that he was trying to protect his sister's honour. Now I saw that it was something very different that he wanted to protect – and use me to retrieve.

"I'll have to . . . think about it," I said cautiously.

He shook his head. "No think. Do."

"It's going to take a lot of planning. I mean, it needs locating . . . You know where it is? Exactly? Have you seen it?"

Again, I got that look: perhaps I have, perhaps I've not.

"And then I'd need to talk to people. Back at home. Financial backing. I might . . . know someone who'd be interested." I was improvising, though; stalling for time. "But then – there's things like salvage rights. If people put up money for it, well, they'll want a good return. You wouldn't get a thing . . . "

He tipped his head on one side, queried me. I said, "Whoever paid to bring it up would get the ship. You might get wages, but that's all. The ship wouldn't be yours. Or mine. I haven't got the money."

"Yes. You have money."

"No, Juan – "

"You *make* money."

"Maybe when I'm older. But right now . . . No. Seriously – you've probably got more than me." It was a heartless thing to say, and obviously untrue. Again, he seemed to fold in on himself, hunched up like a suspicious little goblin. His brief delight over the artifacts was gone. Now he was tense; deep lines like knife-cuts dug into his brows. I tried a little to explain my situation, then, giving up, I told him I was interested, and thought there was a chance we might work something out. "I'll need to speak to people, first," I said again.

"Alright. You speak. Is good."

And as he left, he did something that took me by surprise. He reached out and, with carefully rehearsed formality, he shook my hand. His eyes held mine. They were so like his sister's eyes – the complex whorls of blue and white – but these were hard and purposeful, like frozen jewels. The eyes of insects.

I watched him go, scuttling down the steps, then off along the street, without even a backward glance.

I didn't know how I could stay with her, from that time on. It sounds ridiculous, perhaps, and paranoid, but everywhere we went I felt that I was being followed by a string of little ones – infant Julias and Juans, toddlers and schoolchildren and crabby adolescents, and none of them looked in the least like me.

Their eyes were blue – bright silver blue.

Oh, on the surface, I suppose, our lives went on much as before. We drank down at the harbour bar, we took long walks, made love, made visits . . . There was a big festivity up in the hills, to celebrate a marriage, with roasted pig and quantities of home-made liquor, and dancing until dawn. It was a glorious, exciting time. And yet my heart just wasn't in it.

Once, when I was sitting, brooding, smoking cigarettes and staring out to sea, she came up and she asked me, "So?"

"So what?" I said, joking, smiling, like I'd missed the real enquiry there.

We made love now with a quiet fury, as if we had to fuck or die; mashing each others' bodies, gouging one another with an energy that left no room for sentiment, as if we were mere animals, helpless creatures, harassed by the onset of the night.

This was no glorious Arcadia, I knew now, no simple world of fisher-folk and goatherds, but something more unsettling, come down from the stars, long, long ago, before it ever came to me. A conspiracy which even the conspirators themselves had failed to comprehend.

Most days now found me working on the flyer. I drained the tank, leaving a patch of stained black earth and poisoned grass. I made sure every plug and contact was at optimum efficiency, each part gleaming like the starmen's jewels up in my room.

And then the weather turned. Fierce winds blew off the sea, and clouds banked up over the mountains, spilling rain and thunder on the low hills and the town. I knew this was the weather she'd been waiting for, a storm so strong that it would rake the sea floor, dredging up the debris she required.

To me, though, it meant something else.

I couldn't fly in winds like this.

When winter came, then I'd be stuck here. I needed to fly north as soon as possible. To take the first clear day, and make a start.

There are forgivable betrayals. Excuses that will just hold up: you were too young, naive, you didn't understand . . . There are mitigating circumstances. To hold to them will make it possible to go on living.

What damns though, and damns utterly, are all the efforts afterwards to justify yourself. The claims that what you did was right, and fair, even self-sacrificing – these are the real crimes, the real treachery involved.

A few days later, and a hundred miles from Julia, sat in an air-conditioned bar, I wrote to her.

It was a nasty, pious little letter, though at the time, it seemed to me the soul of magnanimity: it wasn't her fault, I insisted, it was mine; what we'd had had been as beautiful and fragile as a butterfly in summer, a creature of a season, nothing more; our lives had coincided, briefly, and the parting had, I told her, been inevitable from the start . . .

I said she meant a lot to me, would always have a place deep in my heart. We'd meet again some day. And in the meantime, if she ever needed help, in any way, she was to contact me immediately. I'd be there for her.

I wrote the note on hotel stationery, and somehow managed to forget to give a permanent address.

Another week, and I was home.

I boasted to my friends, of course. It was expected. I described adventures, crises, insights that had come to me. I talked

about the beautiful young native girl I'd lived with all that summer . . . I returned, brown-skinned and lean, self-confident, and with a certain measure of celebrity. I never told the story as I've told it here, the real story, the one that counts.

These days, I think about the starship most of all. I still don't know who flew it, what fatal error brought it down. But I think about its pilots, in their final moments, when they knew they were about to crash. At such a time, it strikes me you'll do anything to save yourself, won't you? Whether you're a man, or whether you're a five-dimensional blob from Planet X. Whatever kind of life you've got, you don't want it to end.

Only I think that Juan was right – they *are* dead, in any terms that we can understand. As individuals. As entities. Their bodies are still down there, trapped beneath the sea. Mangled, crushed, starved; whatever got them in the end.

But I imagine (and this is fancy, speculation, nothing more) that before they died, there was an element within themselves, an energy, perhaps, a particle or wave, an essence of some kind, that they were able to release (perhaps only with great pain; perhaps only at the point of death, a magic suicide); an element released into the world, to find a new host, a new life . . . Perhaps a solitary fisherman. Perhaps a goatherd, high up in the hills. Someone, at any rate. And that day, something alien crept into him, inhabited his cells, printing its stamp upon his chromosomes, his very soul.

Later, the man fathered a child. The child had ice-blue eyes.

This may have happened countless times in human history; an alien soul, blended with ours, changing the texture of our lives, our selves.

It might disappear for decades, a generation, maybe more, resurfacing in grandchildren, like a recessive gene: here and gone, and back again.

And each time, it grows more dilute. Its needs are filtered through the mores and temper of society. It manifests as vague, unsettled feelings, unconsoled ideas, longings that seem wild, irrational, absurd; that have to be explained away, somehow.

I think Juan truly thought raising the ship would make his fortune. What other decent reason could he have? Why else should he be interested? Yet at night he must have dreamed of seeing its great ruptured hull, stripped of its weeds and barnacles, of entering its hidden chambers, sitting once again at its controls . . .

That's how I tell the story now. That I fled from something sinister and alien, that threatened to consume me.

Yet there's another version, too. One I only tell myself, when I wake up at three or four a.m., feeling depressed and worthless, when it seems the sky's no longer filled with stars but black, and empty, and devoid of any meaning we could ever learn.

Then I imagine it a different way, a story much, much smaller and more personal: a young man, both naive and arrogant, uncertain of himself, secretly scared of everything – who one time knew a girl who genuinely loved him, cared for him, and whom he found a reason to abandon. Not even, when you come to it, a good reason.

But that's a story I tell seldom, and only to myself, and hope, some day, I might forget.

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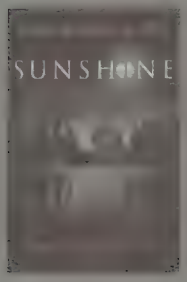


Sandy Auden & Robin McKinley

Sunshine : Robin McKinley — Bantam pb, 389pp, £10.99

Sunshine bakes bread, it's her speciality. She has a stable life, a regular boyfriend, a determined divorcee mum and a good boss. The customers love the cakes she bakes and regularly pop by the coffee house to stuff themselves stupid on her cinnamon rolls and Caramel Cataclysm.

Think this sounds like a Mills and Boon yet? Think again.

Sunshine wants to get away her family responsibilities one night and goes up to the lake to escape for a few hours. She's abducted from the lakeside cabin by a vampire – one of the Others – and taken to a deserted house to become the main course for Con, a high ranking vampire. Chained to the wall in a splendid ballroom, she realises that Con is also restrained in the same way. And he is trying to resist biting her. Still breathing by morning, she helps Con live through the daylight, then rediscovers her own magical blood-inheritance while they are trying to escape.

Her path through life has now changed course and cinnamon rolls are no protection when a gang of vampires are hunting you down. What's she going to do, feed them to death? What's more the Special Others Forces, who police all the vampires and demons at large in the world, are extremely interested in how she escaped. They'll dissect her if they find out her secret. Pursued from both sides of the law, she does the only thing she can – strikes back at her pursuers, with the help of Con, a vampire who now shares a strange supernatural bond with her.

The story of Sunshine and Con reads like a stream of consciousness laid down on paper. Sunshine is a complex character, and her personality is as much the story as the plot is. Each stage of her journey towards self-realisation is infused with her delightful take on life, her passions and her limitations. She has a tendency to ignore difficult issues, has a subtle lack of self-confidence and an understandable desire to return to her stable life. The plot emerges through her various neuroses and we bounce from crisis to crisis, picking up as many bruises as Sunshine from her tumultuous experiences.

Only Sunshine's humour saves her from freaking out. Able to crack jokes even when a vampire's fangs are pressing against the skin of her neck, she develops from a seemingly stereotypical damsel to highly empowered, darkly sharp protagonist who is more than capable of rescuing other people, while still retaining a quiet air of vulnerability.

Focusing mostly on the romantic nature of the story, McKinley has gone for a soft visceral content and a big dose of humanity. The stream of consciousness is mostly uninterrupted through out the book, leading you rapidly through to the slightly surreal and electrically charged climax. It's just a pity that the strong forward swoop is occasionally stalled by a large gust of background information, delaying your journey and leaving you impatient to continue.

There may not be any great re-workings of the vampire mythology in *Sunshine*, but there is a fascinating new universe to explore and a group of congenial characters to keep you company.

SA: Sunshine is a very intelligent and capable character isn't she? Not the sort of lass who'll stand around looking pretty, waiting to be rescued?

RM: I can't imagine writing a story about a swooning heroine. I have this only semi tongue in cheek joke about the Story Council. I used to say that there was a crack in my skull where the stories came through, but that was when I was younger and more idealistic. I now feel that there's a Story Council out there somewhere that *sends* the stories . . . and you know what a mess big complex administrations tend to be. I never know what they're going to send me next, or when. I'm already getting a lot of queries about a sequel to *Sunshine* and I have a brief answer to this on my website, to the effect that I haven't a clue whether I'll write a sequel or not. It's not up to me, it's up to the Story Council, drat them. But I can't believe that even a totally wonky and cross-wired administration would send someone like me a story about a swooning heroine. The first thing I'd do is slap her silly and tell her to buck up. Which arguably is what I did to Sleeping Beauty, and produced *Spindle's End*, where everybody *but* the princess falls asleep.

At the same time I'm not interested in standard heroes – of any gender – either. Heroes with a capital H are boring. They wear their seven-league boots because seven-league boots *fit*. They're brave because they're fearless. That's not real courage, that's not *needing* courage, because they're not afraid in the first place. My stories are all about ordinary people who rise to the extraordinary situations they find themselves in. Even the princesses are ordinary. When you retell fairy tales, as I have done several times, you often find yourself with a princess on your hands, but in fairy tales royalty are a kind of *uber*-Everyone. They're a way of making a situation complex by the shorthand of having this happen to the head of a country. It's not just their own futures that are at stake, but the future of their people. In real life *all* life is complex, but it takes a lot more telling to set it up.

I'm not trying to be ingenuous here. I'm trying to explain a little what writing is like from my perspective. I don't deny – far from it: I'm proud of it – that I specialise in 'strong female characters'. But I don't *do* them . . . that's the way the story goes.

SA: Your strong females do retain their femininity though. Many writers don't achieve that combination.

RM: Where is it hacked in stone that femininity and strength are in any way incompatible? I do get whinges from readers who say that I make my women strong at the cost of making my men weak, but I don't believe it. I think that's those readers' problem. It's still to some degree our society's problem, but that's another . . . story. One of the purposes of the kinds of stories I write, I hope, is to encourage more people in our society to go *do* things, if they're female, and to let the women get on with it – or if the situation presents itself, help them – if they're male. There's plenty of work to go around for everyone.

SA: What's it like when a story arrives from the Story Council?

RM: It comes as a dynamic, 3-dimensional thing, the people in it have lives, the plot is only one piece of an enormous jigsaw that is the world of the story, the world of everybody and everything in it. I try to make sense of a story first – there's a lot of six blind men and an elephant to this part of the process – and then choose and *translate* the crucial bits in a way that creates a kind of *facsimile* that is as true to the 'real' story as possible. I've said many times that the worst thing about being a writer is getting used to the *chasm* between the wonderful, glorious, best-story-ever, technicolour spectacle in your head, and the poor faded thing you get down on paper, having somehow managed to leave the most telling details out, and flattening all the climactic scenes.

The story does give me some help though. Not only do I 'see' a story, I also 'hear' it, the rhythm of the telling. It's not very often in specific words (more's the pity), although some of the dialogue does come like eavesdropping on a conversation. I usually learn somebody's name by hearing somebody else call them by it first, for example.

SA: How did *Sunshine* come to be written in the first person?

RM: The voice the story wants to be told in is an essential part of how the story comes. I'd never choose what voice I was writing in, first or third or omniscient; until – or unless – I can hear its unique 'voice' I'm not going to be able to write the story at all. It's true that I live in dread of a story wanting me to tell it that I can't tell – a way to think about this perhaps is that it might come to me in Sudanese and I can't speak Sudanese, even though I can see the spectacle and know the story is there – but having found out that a given story and I are a good enough match to be getting on with, and I have the 'voice' of it, I get on with it.

First person can offer you a useful structure however. A writer friend – whose debut novel was *not* written in the first person – told me a long time ago that the majority of debut novels are written in first person. I can understand this, in hindsight. Getting inside other people's lives and hearts and brains is fascinating but tricky. If you only have to do it really *thoroughly* with one character, that can simplify your position. It's also a bit more like, you know, life. You *are* only one person – and when you're writing about yourself you write 'I', not 'she' or 'he'. Or if you do write about yourself as 'she' or 'he' – or worse yet, a whole lot of hes and shes – you will probably be sent to a shrink to be evaluated for disassociative disorders.

I've enjoyed *and* been deranged and exhausted by every story I've ever written and *Sunshine* was no different. Any breaks the first-person narration may have given me were more than made up for elsewhere.

Old Dreams Revitalised — Graphic Novels Reviewed by Tim Lees

Orbiter : Warren Ellis & Colleen Doran — Vertigo hb, 104pp, £24.99
B.P.R.D. : Mike Mignola, Christopher Golden & others — Dark Horse pb, 120pp, £13.99
Promethea : Alan Moore & others — ABC, vols 1–3, pb, 180pp, £13.99; vol 4, hb, 190pp, £18.99

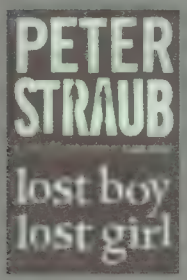
In Warren Ellis's *Orbiter*, the time is the near future. The space programme has been cancelled, and Kennedy Space Centre is home to vagrants, whose presence there – never explained – perhaps constitutes a pilgrimage of some kind. Then, suddenly and violently, the space shuttle *Venture* returns . . . Its disappearance, ten years earlier, had marked the end of manned space flight. It returns with a uniquely enhanced gravity propelled engine, a living skin that feeds on radiation, and just one crew member left – and apparently insane . . . But what begins like *Alien* ends up much nearer *2001*. As Ellis indicates in his introduction, this book is a plea for the resumption of a serious manned space programme. As such it seems curiously old fashioned, yet succeeds in reminding us that, if we *do* find life out there, it will alter our entire conception of the universe and of our place in it; it will be a discovery perhaps more important than anything in history. It's curious to catch such sentiments from the author of the scurrilous *Transmetropolitan*, 'the man with a sneer for every occasion' (as Grant Morrison once called him), though it seems that, like that other hard bitten old cynic, William Burroughs, Ellis really does believe our future lies in outer space. Agree or not, *Orbiter* is an excellent and surprising piece of work, with credible if somewhat sketchy characters and enough hard science to please serious SF fans, revitalising old dreams in a new form. Special mention should be given to Doran and Stewart's illustrations, which recall the golden age of British comics art (anyone remember Frank Bellamy?), ie about the same time space exploration really *was* new and exciting. Now there's a coincidence.

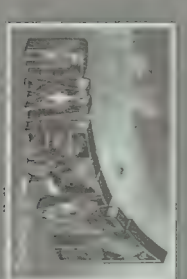
BPRD is a *Hellboy* spin off, and, if it makes fewer demands on its readers than the other work reviewed here, there's nonetheless a considerable intelligence and humanity lurking in these relatively simple tales. The Bureau for Paranormal Research and Defense is a kind of mystical X-Files; its field agents include a homunculus, a fish man and a medium whose physical body has been destroyed, leaving his astral form held in a special containment suit with a goldfish bowl head. There are marvels galore, including a trip to the centre of the Earth, and some gentle parody; in a '30s style strip, a crazed killer announces that he has never killed anyone; rather, his mind has done it for him. His brain then breaks free and attempts to strangle the hero with its spinal cord. Beyond such sensationalism, however, there is a warmth to these pieces, an emphasis on the importance of friendship, and an awareness that organisations including the Bureau often do not have their workforce's best interests at heart. The final story deals with the horrors of the slave trade, and, from fairly clichéd material, crafts something moving yet unsentimental. Traditional comics, but with a sophisticated edge.

Alan Moore's *Promethea* also starts from a traditional launch pad, but like Ellis's space shuttle, moves rapidly beyond. Promethea is a kind of Wonder Woman figure incarnated in a succession of mortal females. She is part of the Immateria – the world of imagination – but initially behaves pretty much like any other self respecting superheroine. Soon, however, the series shifts direction, and becomes a kind of occult primer, as Promethea learns sexual magic from elderly Jack Faust, journeys to the planets of the Kabbalah, meets Aleister Crowley, John Dee and Austin Spare . . . This is all extraordinary stuff, and impossible to fully take in at first reading. Still more interesting is Moore's determination to use the comics medium in ways no other form could possibly support. While many artists and writers treat it as an extension of cinema, Moore, as he revealed in his interview (TTA30 & 31) has little interest in film. What he gives us, instead, is an astonishing pictorial narrative, in which art styles change to represent different moods and spiritual states, dialogue and narrative become circular, or pursue a möbius strip, and genre conventions mix and mingle in ways that boggle the mind. Most audacious of all is the final chapter of volume 2, in which each full page illustration contains 1) an anagram (often stretched, but always somehow relevant) of 'Promethea'; 2) a tarot card, representing the evolution of the universe and mankind; 3) a joke by Aleister Crowley, illustrated by portraits of the mage from conception to death; 4) the comments of the two caduceus serpents, Mac and Mike (Macro and Micro); and 5) Promethea's own remarks, her confusion neatly serving to bind these disparate elements together. God knows what it all means, but it's fascinating stuff. Also, from the hands of J.H. Williams III, Mick Gray and others, some of the best artwork ever seen in graphic storytelling. Buy it while it's still legal.

And in brief, a couple of series well worth checking out. Firstly, Bill Willingham's *Fables* (Vertigo), in which the characters of fairy tale are to be found living secretly in modern day New York. From this unbearably twee premise comes a gritty story of power politics, double dealing, sex, violence and considerable humour. Secondly, fans of the *X Men* films might try Grant Morrison's *New X Men* (Marvel). In between brutally ditching some of the more embarrassing concepts and characters of the series' forty year history, Morrison is working his usual subversive magic, using a popular and approachable form to mess with our heads in a distinctly enjoyable way.

(All the above except *Promethea* vol 4 are available in the UK from Titan Books)





Book Reviews by Peter Tennant

DANTE'S EQUATION : JANE JENSEN
Orbit hb, 611pp, £12.99

Dante's Equation explores the link between cabbalistic magic and quantum physics, or something like that, with four characters involved in a quest that brings them together. In Seattle, ambitious scientist Jill Talcott makes a discovery that will revolutionise our understanding of the universe, conducting experiments that threaten the very fabric of reality. In Jerusalem, Rabbi Aharon Handalman, a proud and overbearing scholar, finds clues to a terrible secret encoded in the text of the Torah, knowledge which unfortunately he shares with Mossad. Denton Wyle is a spoiled rich boy playing at journalist for one of the more sensation prone tabloids while secretly investigating the disappearance of a young girl many years ago, something he personally witnessed and was blamed for, though nothing against him could ever be proved. These three are linked by a shared interest in the writings of Rabbi Kobinski, a physicist who was decades ahead of his time and sent to Auschwitz by the Nazis, reputedly disappearing from the concentration camp in a ball of light. Talcott, Handalman and Wyle travel to Auschwitz in search of Kobinski's secret, but hard on their trail is the borderline psychotic Calder Farris, an army officer involved in covert operations. His job is to investigate 'blue sky' science and secure anything that might be of use to the USA, and Farris will do whatever it takes to achieve his goal. The four of them pass through a warp in the space time continuum, each sent to a different world, one tailored to their individual personalities, where they are given the chance to learn valuable lessons about themselves before returning to Earth.

Bottom line is this is a VR story without the VR, using other worlds as a spiritual/moral learning device. The theory behind it all seems horribly implausible, an authorial convenience rather than something that might actually happen. Basically, there are a multitude of different universes, but the balance of good and evil in each is different, these qualities regulated through the mechanism of luck. Despite some impressive window dressing Jensen doesn't really make this credible, particularly when she tags on the idea of morality shaping the universe; things such as good, bad and luck are not objective qualities, but exist simply from the perspective of sentient beings. She tries to give her creation a spiritual dimension, but shies away from the implications of that and never really explains how the characters end up where they 'belong' when passing through the warp. The two halves of the book do not sit together well, on the one hand a techno-thriller along the lines of Pavlou's *Decipher* and on the other a series of interlocking metaphysical learning experiences couched in SFnal terms that bring to mind Lindsay's *A Voyage to Arcturus*.

More significantly for me, I found myself totally out of sympathy with the characters, who are all thoroughly unpleasant individuals. With the benefit of hindsight, Jensen has a reason for this, so that they can learn whatever lessons the universe has to teach them and be improved; the emotionally detached Talcott learns to relate to other people, the overbearing Handalman is taught to be more tolerant of those who fall short of his high standards, and so on. The trouble is that by the time we'd got to this stage of the book I was so thoroughly disillusioned with all of them that I didn't want a moral reformation so much as sticky ends all round. Nor is the change in Calder Farris convincing, insofar as his attitude seems shaped by mental illness rather than ingrained behaviour (the guy should be locked up and sedated). In the final analysis this is a book that promises much, but doesn't really deliver despite presenting us with some fascinating concepts.

FLOATER : LUCIUS SHEPARD
PS Publishing pb, 154pp, £10

William Dempsey is a NYPD officer on sick leave after an incident in which he and two fellow officers shot an unarmed civilian. Dempsey is troubled by a floater, a congregation of matter in his eye that is obscuring his vision, and which the Department psychiatrist puts down to psychosomatic causes, the guilt he feels at what happened. Then Dempsey learns that the man he shot, Israel Lara, was a Haitian emigrant and heavily involved in voodoo. Dempsey may just be the victim of a curse, but as he investigates further, driven on by the visions that come to him through his damaged eye, an even more chilling reality becomes apparent. He has unwittingly become the pawn in a conspiracy that has cosmic implications, with the power of a member of the voodoo pantheon up for grabs to a human contender, and Dempsey's life is the only thing that stands between his rival and the ultimate prize of godhood.

This short novel is Shepard returning to familiar ground, its otherworldly battle reminiscent of that between two shamans in *Kalimantan*, but whereas the earlier novel was set in a remote and obliquely fantastic milieu, this is as ordinary and real as the city streets we walk each day, and therefore even more immediate and alarming. This sense of contemporaneity is emphasised right from the start, with a situation that has become horribly familiar from our TV screens in recent years, that of police officers accused of a race killing, and the trauma that this results in, the guilt and despair Dempsey feels, is handled with a rare sensitivity, the picture of a good man who finds himself in an intolerable situation portrayed with a conviction that wounds. Shepard paces the book beautifully, each step along the way on Dempsey's voyage of discovery timed to perfection and logically following on from what has gone before, until both he and the reader have no alternative than to take at face value the fantastic things occurring and react on their own terms. And, while I have no idea what research Shepard has done, the background information on voodoo sounds convincing and gives the book an extra depth, offering us a fascinating insight into an

alternative belief system. The climactic battle between Dempsey and his nemesis, which takes place on another plane of reality, is handled with panache, a real sense of otherworldliness about it for all that what is happening appears quite ordinary in some senses, reminiscent of nothing so much as the inevitable scene in a Western movie where two gunfighters shoot it out in a town street, and then Shepard pulls the rug out from under the reader's feet with an ambiguously slanted ending that challenges our perceptions of reality.

Floater is an excellent short novel from one of the leading exponents of the fantastic, and very attractively packaged with an introduction by Jeffrey Ford and full colour wraparound cover by Edward Miller.

LOST BOY LOST GIRL : PETER STRAUB
HarperCollins hb, 281pp, £17.99

After the large scale of his last few novels Straub adopts a more minimalist approach for this book, which also marks a return to the classic ghost story fiction with which he first made his name, though with a serial killer subtext. In fact in many ways it seems to be a resume of his career so far, with places and people, themes and ideas that will be familiar to long time admirers of Straub's work.

Writer Tim Underhill, of *Koko* fame, returns to his hometown of Millhaven to attend the funeral of his sister-in-law, who committed suicide for no apparent reason. While there he notices the strange behaviour of his nephew Mark, who later disappears after sending Tim an enigmatic e-mail. Tim returns to his hometown yet again, this time to help his brother cope. Millhaven is being terrorised by the Sherman Park Killer, a serial killer who preys on young people, and it is feared Mark is the latest victim.

Intercut with this, in flashback, is the story of Mark's fascination with the old house opposite where he lives and its strange occupants, a beautiful young girl and a sinister man. Tim learns that the house once belonged to Millhaven's first serial killer, a man called Kalendar who was related to Mark's mother. Kalendar turned the house into a maze with hidden rooms in which to torment his victims, and many of its horrors remained undiscovered to the present day. Tim follows the same trail of clues that so bewitched his nephew, all relating to events that happened many years ago, while at the same time investigating the modern day case of the Sherman Park Killer with the help of his old friend Tom Pasmore, an 'armchair' detective of great renown who previously appeared in Straub's novel *Mystery*. While the present day investigation proves amenable to logic that concerning what happened in the past is more intractable, with the revelation of a terrible secret and the hint of troubled spirits finally achieving rest, all put over in terms that remain ambiguous.

This is a beautifully written book, as one would expect from a writer of Straub's stature, packed with perfectly drawn images of strangeness and delicately fashioned hooks to grab the reader and draw him in to its story. The various strands of plot fit seamlessly together, so that in retrospect everything that happens seems perfectly logical, and yet this is a book that constantly surprises, with one shock coming hard on the heels of another. Evocation of place has always been one of the author's strengths, and it's used to full advantage here, with Millhaven, a small city that has fallen on hard times, along the way losing both civic pride and its sense of identity, becoming Nowheresville USA, brought to depressing life on the page, its beleaguered citizens driven close to despair at the monster who walks their windswept streets, while the Kalendar house itself is surely one of the most memorable residences in recent Horror fiction, depicted with an intensity and sense of dire foreboding that lingers in the mind, its dark secrets and tragic past reflected in the souls of those who set foot within its walls.

Another certain pleasure is Straub's gift for characterisation, particularly seen in his depiction of Mark and his friend Jimbo, two young men on the verge of the great adventure that is life, open to all its possibilities for wonder and dismissive of the dangers that lurk in ambush, until they too find themselves with backs against the wall. Their relationship is perhaps mirrored in that between Tim and his resentful underachiever of a brother, the one who went away and made a place for himself in the world and the other who stayed behind, preferring to maintain his grasp on the already attained rather than risk reaching out for more. At bottom this is a novel of the possible, with Mark's quest for a beauty and love that seems unattainable the key note, a metaphor for all the hopes and dreams that we abandon over the course of a lifetime. Perhaps he is not the lost boy of the title at all. Perhaps it is all the rest of us who are lost. It's a thought.

You come away from this book feeling that you have been entertained and informed by a master. Highly recommended.

MAUL : TRICIA SULLIVAN
Orbit pb, 355pp, £10.99

This is a novel with two parallel storylines. In one of them, with her friends Suk Hee and Keri, Sun goes down to the mall to engage in a little retail therapy. Like all girls of their age they are dedicated followers of fashion and so carry the latest in firearms, but when trouble comes, a run in with a girl gang led by videoartist 10€sha, it turns out to be far worse than anyone could have expected and events spiral out of control until the whole mall is declared a danger zone and the National Guard are called in to take care of business. For Sun there doesn't seem to be any way out from under. Meanwhile in the parallel track we get a world where nearly all the men have been wiped out by deadly Y-viruses; most of the survivors live in pseudo-medieval castles, and are highly prized by the women as breeding material. Scientist Maddie experiments on Meniscus, a cloned and mute male whose body may just hold the key to defeating the viruses, or perhaps even communicating with them, but there are certain parties with a vested interest in her not succeeding, and when Meniscus encounters Snake, a rogue male on the run from the authorities, the shit well and truly hits the fan.

There is the suggestion that all the events taking place in the mall are just part of a VR simulation in which Meniscus is resolving his own internal problems vis-à-vis the virus, but also hints in the conversation between the girls that their present is the past of the world in which men have become virtually extinct, or even that the world of Meniscus is itself a simulation, and a first impulse may well be to bemoan yet another novel in which the world is shown to be a VR construct, but while the *Matrix* comparisons can't be avoided Sullivan's use of such ideas is much more sophisticated; she refuses to lay everything out for the reader, instead offering us an oblique interplay between the two strands and leaving us to decide for ourselves what's what in the reality stakes. Nor is this the only common reference point for the reader. The future setting with its female dominated society brings to mind several similar novels; Sullivan admits as much with a reference to Tepper's *The Gate to Women's Country* in the acknowledgements. Elsewhere we have the character Snake reprising the hero of Carpenter's *Escape from New York* while some of the contests the men engage in reminded me of *Running Man* or even TV's *Gladiators*.

None of this matters though; the verve of Sullivan's writing and the wealth of incidental invention with which she packs the book is enough to sweep away any and all objections to its structure. There is something new on practically every other page, with enough throwaway ideas and inventions for half a dozen ordinary novels. For instance, the idea that viruses may be attempting to communicate with human beings, or use of the terrorbug, a virus that inspires irrational and unreasoning fear in whoever it infects. Elsewhere we have the dramatic picture of teen gangs running wild, video artists who stream events as they happen and hunt down the reviewers who've dissed their work (let's not go there) and men living in huge castles where they compete with each other to become prize studs. And this is just the tip of a substantial iceberg. Sullivan piles it on and makes it all seem real, no matter how incredible. She is particularly good with regard to the charac-

terisation, populating *Maul* with a cast of believable people, from Maddie, who is desperate for her research to succeed but finally remembers her humanity, to the incorrigible and larger than life Snake, the ultimate rebel without a cause in search of a system to buck; from gun toting, enigmatic and possibly psychotic Suk Hee, to the wonderful free spirit that is Sun, a crazy cocktail of raging hormones and attitude, obsessing about boys and fashion one minute, putting the world to rights in the next (your typical teen in fact). And add to that the fact that Sullivan's writing rocks, with a frenetic prose style that helps sweep aside any objections to credibility and leaves you gasping at her sheer audacity in putting such things on paper. Who can resist a book with chapter headings like 'Extra Spooky with Sauce' and 'High Risk Dildo'? Who in their right minds would want to? This book is sexy and cerebral and action packed; in short, a whole lot of fun.

BIBLIOMANCY : ELIZABETH HAND
PS Publishing hb, 296pp, £35

Elizabeth Hand is an expert at blurring fictional boundaries and dodging the bullet when it comes to genre specification, consistently producing work for which the only accurate label is quality, and this collection of four previously published novellas contains some of her finest writing.

'Cleopatra Brimstone' is the story of a young woman, fascinated by the lives of winged insects, who is brutally raped. Later, on sabbatical in London, she gets a job in the insect house at London Zoo and slowly metamorphoses into a creature of the night herself, one who has sex with men and then transforms them into rare moths that she kills. It is a powerful and intensely moving story, beautifully written and characterised, with the pain and emotional isolation of the heroine coming off of the page, reminiscent in some ways of Kafka but with its own sense of the bizarre and mysterious. In contrast 'Pavane for a Prince of the Air' is almost wholly naturalistic except for a small coda, the compellingly detailed account of a friend's death from cancer, each step in the process meticulously recorded and packed with those small touches that bring a story to life, intensely moving and yet not a whiff of sentimentality about it, ultimately a celebration of life rather than a surrender to the Grim Reaper.

'Chip Crockett's Christmas Carol' is the longest of these novellas and my personal favourite, as old friends whose lives have been torn apart by the passage of time and other ordeals are once again reunited and filled with nostalgia by the memory of a childhood entertainer. There is magic here, both the kind that defies our understanding of the natural world and the other kind that arises out of the human heart, the things that contain the best of who we are, here symbolised by a father's love for his child and a friend's willingness to attempt so much for another. Hand spares us the happy ending a less skilled writer, a writer less in tune with her audience's sensibilities, would have opted for, giving us instead something far finer, a resolution tinged with hope. Finally we have 'The Least Trumps', inspired by an episode in John Crowley's *Little Big*, and every bit as wonderful as its source material. Lesbian tattooist Ivy, the daughter of a famous children's writer, discovers an unusual pack of tarot cards and inadvertently changes the world through their use. The subtlety of the plot is matched only by the cast of larger than life characters, especially Ivy's mother the irrepressible Blakie, a celebrated writer of children's books and unapologetic lesbian, and The Lonely Cottage, where most of the events take place, so vividly realised that it almost becomes a character itself.

An introduction by Lucius Shepard and revealing Story Notes by Hand herself round out a perfect collection of fiction, with John Anster Fitzgerald's marvellously evocative painting 'The Stuff that Dreams are Made of' as a singularly striking and appropriate wraparound cover. *Bibliomancy* is a thing of beauty in all senses of that overused word, and fiction doesn't get much better than this.

NYLON ANGEL : MARIANNE DE PIERRES
Orbit pb, 330pp, £6.99

This is billed as the first Parrish Plessis novel and is set in some grim future Australia, where the super-city of Vivacity sprawls all the way down the east coast. Vivacity is neatly divided along economic fault lines, the rich and well to do living in fortress like suburbs while all the rest are dumped together in the middle, an area that roughly resembles the Circles of Hell, albeit nowhere near as prosaic as Dante's vision, with disease and poverty, crime and gang warfare rife. Top dogs in this milieu are the media, able to defy the police and authorities with impunity. Parrish works for crime lord Jamon Mondo (sex slave would be a more accurate job description) and is desperate to get out from under. To this end she agrees to help two men wanted for the murder of a media superstar, only to find herself in the middle of an even bigger mess as the media tear the city apart in search of 'justice' and higher ratings. She also becomes caught up in a war between rival gangs, assimilated into the plans of a messianic figure, discovers that she is a conduit to the voodoo gods and, while I can't quite place it, I'm pretty sure there's a kitchen sink in there somewhere.

This is a book with a lot going on but not much happening, and mostly it all seems very familiar, the usual menagerie of badder than bad guys all falling over themselves to prove they can be nastier than the one before, plus assorted double crosses and conspiracies within conspiracies. At bottom this is nothing so much as TV's *Dark Angel*, given a voodoo twist and a whiff of sexual violence to flavour. Parrish is your run of the mill heroine with a gift for wisecracks and a brash exterior that hides the inevitable heart of gold, so while running for her life she takes time out to ensure the poor get fed. The forces ranged against her are depicted as well nigh irresistible when it comes to raising the odds but prove all too fallible when the chips are down. The story itself doesn't quite add up, with plenty of moments of horrendously convenient coincidence, and while the idea of a society where the media rule is potentially interesting little is done to either exploit or explain this situation. We get a few rewarding touches of incidental invention and a couple of memorable characters (sassy chino-shaman Mei Sheong would be my favourite) but overall there's nothing here to get excited about. It's all been done before and better.

ALSISO PROJECT : ANDREW HOOK, EDITOR
Elastic Press pb, 333pp, £6

The idea here is for twenty-three writers, Elastic Press contributors past and pres-ent plus invited others, to each contribute a story with the title 'Alsiso', a made-up word resulting from a typing error made by Marion Arnott, a concept whose whimsy will appeal to many. The book comes with an introduction by Chris Fowler and is divided into three sections.

The first part opens with a mythopoeic fantasy by K.J. Bishop giving an origin for the word Alsiso, the name used by an assassin, and then developing a whole history stretching down through the ages with its use as a portmanteau term, an excellent and evocative stage setter for the rest of the collection, hinting at whole realms of possibility. Nick Jackson's story is a rather humdrum account of a young boy going on his vision quest to discover his true name and thwarting the schemes of the evil One Eye, competently written, as are all of these stories, but nothing to really catch the imagination. More original is Justina Robson's contribution, taking the old familiar theme of the space craft whose crew meet an untimely and mysterious end on a planet thought safe for human colonisation and giving it a new and satisfying twist, the story as striking for its use of assorted narrative devices as for the invention. Kaaren Warren cheats slightly, calling her story 'Alsiso (or Al's Iso Bar)', depicting a society in which certain women gain strange powers when they fall pregnant and exploring its implications, a piece that holds the attention all the way, with some compelling characterisation and a fascinating subtext on gender

issues, but in the final analysis you are left feeling that this excellent premise has not been explored in sufficient detail to do more than whet the reader's appetite. Marie O'Regan's story is an intriguing riff on mental illness and past deeds coming back to haunt the present, as a man's life falls apart around him and he is left with nothing except the knowledge of who he really is and what he is capable of, chillingly real in its depiction of sexual violence and a disintegrating relationship. In Chris Kenworthy's piece, one of the most compelling here, Alsiso is the name of an idyllic valley sought by two erstwhile occultists, with their magical doings depicted in credibly strange but humdrum terms and only the vagueness of the ending spoils an otherwise excellent story. Andrew Humphrey's story is typical of his work, the tale of an unhappily married woman who is now a widow and learning to live again through the intervention of her long lost brother, full of the subtle nuances of character and telling family detail we've come to expect from this writer.

Alasdair Stuart kicks off the second section, his story taking the form of lecture notes by Dr Alan Duffy, cataloguing the appearance of the word Alsiso throughout history, a rather more mundane version of the Bishop piece and itself more story notes than actual story. In Allen Ashley's two-parter, 'Obverse' and 'Reverse', Alsiso is both the name of a rock band seen as subversive by the authorities and a rather intrusive film fan, but while each individual section is impressive, with Ashley's coolly analytical prose illuminated by a certain droll insouciance, their linking doesn't actually produce anything greater than the sum of the parts, with the name and a line from a song the only visible link. Nicholas Royle's protagonist hears the word in his dreams and it brings back memories of a dead girlfriend, engendering feelings of guilt and self doubt. The story was beautifully written and held the interest all the way, culminating in a wonderfully ambiguous final image, but I couldn't really feel much for the character or identify with his self-indulgent soul searching and self-pity. 'ALS 150' by Antony Mann also disappoints, giving us nothing more substantial than a bad tempered driver involved in a fatal accident. Andrew Hook's Alsiso is the former nom de guerre of a prostitute with whom ex-cop Mordent gets involved, agreeing to help out when she receives a death threat, a story that is both gratifyingly and credibly kinky, with a novel use of bubble wrap and a pleasing plot twist. Matt Dinniman's 'Alsiso (or The Sociology of the Unpopped Masses)' is an end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it scenario with all the narrative drive and violent perversity of a Richard Laymon novel as our hero tries to get to his girlfriend before she blows up, meeting assorted crazies en route. Not subtle, but enjoyable if you take it all with a pinch of salt. For Tamar Yellin Alsiso is a word of power and simply saying it aloud brings on a deadly virus, a bleak and powerful story of life in extremis. At twenty-four pages the longest story in the book, 'Alsiso (or The Pain, Heartbreak and Redemption of Owen Frost)' by Steve Savile has echoes of Clive Barker, with an order of immortal monks who kidnap people and force them to embody their sins in works of art which are then fed to a massive golem in the hope of bringing him to life and destroying the angels to restore belief in God. There's some vivid and disturbing imagery here, but the portentous prose is slightly off-putting and the basic premise, that thanks to angelic intervention the world has become such an idyllic place nobody needs to believe in God any more, only makes sense if you never watch TV or read a newspaper, and that the golem's creation is credited to Michelangelo only compounds the problem, as surely in his day belief in God was not a problem.

Kay Green opens the third section with a Dunsany pastiche in which the Gods explore what it is to be human, a story that for lyric beauty is rivalled only by the Bishop but for all that leaves in the mind the impression that it just doesn't add up. John Grant dabbles with metaphysics in a tale that delights with both its cleverness and invention, not to mention the author's finely wrought prose with its enviable lightness of touch, as creatures from a dream dimension manifest in our own reality with possibly dire results. Gary Couzens gives us a lover's triangle with Al, Simon and Sophie, exploring his familiar themes of sexual identity and relationships, making this one of the strongest stories in the collection, and Couzens scores extra points by never revealing the identity of the narrator, either one of the three or some gestalt personality (Alsiso?). David Allen Lambert's story is characterised by some wild writing, but things don't really add up as the main character and his female friend are pursued by a homicidal madman and the ghost of Alsiso lingers in the background, so that the reader is reminded of too many straight to video Horror movies to take this seriously. Contrived is the word I'm looking for. Brian Howell's story is set in Japan, with Jun choosing between a dream existence in which he can do whatever he wants and the realities of a wife and children, a story that initially intrigues but ultimately is nothing more than an affirmation of family values. For Conrad Williams Alsiso is the name of a magical metal given to his scrap dealer protagonist by a beautiful woman, who may just be an immortal robot, and also may have been an old flame of his father, who may also . . . Anyway, Williams's prose can't be faulted and holds the interest right through to an ending that is not so much ambiguous as muddled. Lisa Pearson tells of a man and woman on a visit to Africa and involved in a strange sexual relationship, with some of the most striking prose in the collection, though the Alsiso connection is tenuous, the name just dropped into a sentence listing various types of African fauna, and the story could have used a bit more fleshing out. Aptly enough Marion Arnott closes the collection and with a story that marks a new departure for her, an Oriental fantasy that looks at the toll of war and how people are changed by events, a finely judged and moving end to a collection that rings all the changes and then some.

I should add that the book comes with excellent production values throughout and an evocative cover illustration by Bishop, and at only £6 (inc p&p) in future the word Alsiso could well become synonymous with the term bargain. Get it now before Elastic Press come to their senses.

(www.elasticpress.com)

THE DARK : ELLEN DATLOW, EDITOR
Tor hb, 381pp, $25.95

In her introduction to this collection of sixteen stories Ellen Datlow states 'I wanted to edit a new ghost story anthology that was filled exclusively with *scary* ghost stories.' I wouldn't go so far as to claim it succeeds in that regard, but certainly *The Dark* contains some very fine writing, a sample of the best the Horror genre has to offer, and should challenge those dullards who still insist that it isn't on a par with the finest literature.

Jeffrey Ford's 'The Trentino Kid' kicks off, the story of a young man haunted by the ghost of boy lost at sea and imploring him to bring the corpse to land, a story that is in many ways a eulogy for all the illusions of youth, both disturbing and at the same time containing a note of sympathy for the human condition as the protagonist is led to examine his own situation. 'The Ghost of the Clock' by Tanith Lee is a more traditional piece, though with a modern twist, as a spiteful aunt tries to scare her niece with an invented ghost story only to have her creation take on a little more reality than she bargained for, a masterly slice of storytelling that deftly draws the reader in as the writer piles one detail on top of another, binging to mind the old masters of the form, such as M.R. James. Terry Dowling's 'One Thing About the Night' is one of the best stories in the collection, with two modern day 'antiquarians' falling foul of a mirrored room, a totally absorbing piece of fiction that is enriched by occult underpinnings and excellent characterisation, while the nebulous nature of the menace only makes it even more sinister, leaving the reader totally unprepared for the final and shocking revelation. Mike O'Driscoll touches on strange events in the region of Death Valley with 'The Silence of the Falling Stars', as a park ranger becomes fascinated by a family group, a story that is compelling to read but perhaps loses focus a bit towards the end, suggesting that so much could be taking place inside the narrator's head.

Gahan Wilson's 'The Dead Ghost' is insubstantial, the slight story of a man who is haunted by a corpse in a hospital, doing little with this scenario except to offer it up for the reader's approval. 'Seven Sisters' by Jack Cady is a haunted house story with a twist, featuring a town that is dying and people being used by the spirit of a dead magician, a tale that in its somewhat wistful and nostalgic dwelling on past glory and through the quality of the writing, vivid and full of beauty, brought to mind the work of Bradbury in his heyday. 'Subway' by Joyce Carol Oates is another weak link, a rather slight tale of a woman searching for Mr Right on the subway, an endless quest as she appears to be dead, and while Oates's evocation of this can't be faulted, full of quiet desperation and bitter irony, there is a feeling that something more is required in the plot department. Stephen Gallagher excels with 'Dr Hood', another story that is rich in incidental detail, as a famous physicist grieving for his wife tries to subject supernatural phenomenon to scientific method. This one pleases with its ambiguity, the suggestion that the physicist may be losing his mind, and in the meticulously detailed and wholly credible relationship between father and daughter, while the ghost hunting methods bear the undeniable stamp of authenticity.

In 'An Amicable Divorce' Daniel Abraham depicts a husband and wife driven apart by guilt over the death of their son, full of wonderful touches of emotional subtlety culminating in a truly savage ending and bringing to mind *Don't Look Now*, though with the roles reversed. Ramsey Campbell is on top form with 'Feeling Remains', in which a young boy falls foul of an old lady's restless spirit. Campbell's tongue in cheek portrayal of a painfully PC family and its dysfunctional opposite is a certain delight for the reader. Sharyn McCrumb's 'The Gallows Necklace' is another traditional piece, with a man finally putting to rest his guilt over events that took place sixty years earlier, a story that would not have looked out of place in a collection from the Victorian age, full of telling detail and understated prose. 'Brownie, and Me' by Charles L. Grant is a quiet, moody story, with a man seeing a ghost as the first sign of how his world has changed and can never be put back together again, a subtle piece that engages the emotions to both alarm and sadden.

In 'Velocity' Kathe Koja gives us the story of an artist whose every new creation reprises the death of his architect father, told in the form of an interview for a magazine intercut with unsettling descriptions of the unusual house in which events take place, an oblique and ultimately moving account of madness, possession and the power of grief. 'Limbo' by Lucius Shepard is the longest story here, a novella about a criminal in hiding who falls for an abused woman, only to discover she is someone other than she claims to be, and that he has been lured into an other-dimensional trap. This is beautifully written and packed to the gills with believable characterisation and fascinating ideas, not least in its depiction of Limbo itself which has echoes of *Black House* and *House of Leaves*. Kelly Link's 'The Hortlak' is slightly disappointing, an absurdist melodrama that exists within its own warped logic, as Eric and Batu try to revolutionise the retail industry, catering to zombies and other strangers, while the girl Charley rides by in her car full of dead dogs, or something like that. It was . . . different, and while enthralled by the off the wall quality of the story I wasn't really satisfied by it. Lastly there's 'Dancing Men' by Glen Hirshberg, a writer I am coming to greatly admire, in which a Jewish teacher is reminded of a childhood rite of passage by his visit to the ruins of a concentration camp, a strange and unnerving slice of fiction.

As counterpoint to their own stories each writer is asked to name their own favourite ghost story and say why, a revealing exercise that adds a novel touch to one of the finest collections of short fiction the Horror genre has seen in recent times.

GREETINGS FROM LAKE WU : JAY LAKE
Wheatland Press pb, 246pp, $19.95

Each story in this first collection from talented writer Jay Lake comes with an illustration by the artist Frank Wu, images that bring the prose alive in new and exciting ways, suggesting that the book is a collaboration in the true sense of the word and not simply a matter of a hired gun artist coming in to add a few frills after the hard work has been done.

The collection opens with 'The Courtesy of Guests', a beautifully written story in which two evolved humans return to destroy the world that gave their kind life, and an alien shapeshifter joins forces with a sentient city to prevent this happening. Lake has an eye for the extraordinary, and his characters are a compelling blend of the known and strange, making their interplay a source of endless fascination. 'The Trick of Disaster', in which a Clown visits a small community in search of sinners, is reminiscent of Cordwainer Smith's short work, a superb evocation of the sinister quality of clowns and revelling in its inversion of customary values. The savage and moving 'Eglantine's Time' has a genetically advanced woman wreaking revenge on her creators, a story that examines the moral issues attendant upon technology and gives them a human dimension without descending into the realms of polemic. 'The Scent of Rotting Roses' is set in the wake of the collapse of a galactic civilisation, with scavengers visiting isolated worlds in search of lost technology, and this time getting far more than they bargained for, the story serving up a fascinating medley of ideas and people, but ultimately not quite convincing. In contrast 'G.O.D.' is provocative, witty and entertaining, an assemblage of three vignettes on the theme of deity, touching upon myth, fairy tale and religion. 'The Angle of My Dreams' has a young boy inspired by the *Challenger* disaster to discover the secret of flight, this in turn serving as a metaphor for his troubled relationship with his grandfather, the one a dreamer and the other too scared to imagine anything more than he can hold in his hand, a moving account of innocence and redemption. 'Tall Spirits, Blocking the Night' involves an encounter with otherworldly beings, an eerie and effective tale packed with unsettling imagery.

'Who Sing but Do Not Speak' is perhaps the least effective story here, detailing the quest of an insectoid being for beauty, with little to offer the reader except as curiosity piece, while 'Glass: A Love Story' is a clever adaptation of the Greek myths, as a man falls in love with a woman made out of glass and undertakes a trip to the centre of a labyrinth to win her heart. 'The Murasaki Doctrine' is the longest story, a novella in which a human colony world is invaded by insectoid aliens and the humans fight to warn the Earth before the enemy's nefarious scheme can be put into operation. More than any of the other stories this is pure adventure, reminiscent in many ways of Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*, taking off at a terrific clip and never slowing the pace for a moment, packed with incident, invention, action and memorable characters, not least of them the old warhorse Murasaki herself. In the truly horrific story 'The Goat Cutter' a young boy encounters the Devil, an evocation of evil so strong you can almost feel the corruption coming off of the pages and taste it in the back of your throat as you read. 'Jack's House' is another *tour de force* of invention, a vast domicile abandoned by its human owner and fought over by packs of mice, rats, cats and other, more nebulous creatures. Joshua the rat leaves the house in search of an alliance with the dogs to save his tribe from defeat. Imagine *The Wind in the Willows* rewritten by Stephen King and you'll have some idea of what this one is like. Finally in 'The Passing of Guests' we pick up the story of Port and Ahriman, the sentient city and alien shapeshifter of the first story, incalculable millennia in the future as they confront the heat death of the universe and cast about them for an alternative, an elegiac piece that nicely rounds out the collection, with its hint of a new beginning and endless possibility.

Reading Lake one cannot help being reminded of other writers (Smith, Heinlein, Leiber, Asimov etc) and yet, while written in a recognised tradition and wearing their influence lightly, these stories are uniquely his own, dealing with themes that are universal, fashioned with all the skill of a born craftsman and fired with the passion of the true iconoclast. It's early days yet, but I suspect that this young writer has great things ahead of him.

(www.wheatlandpress.com)

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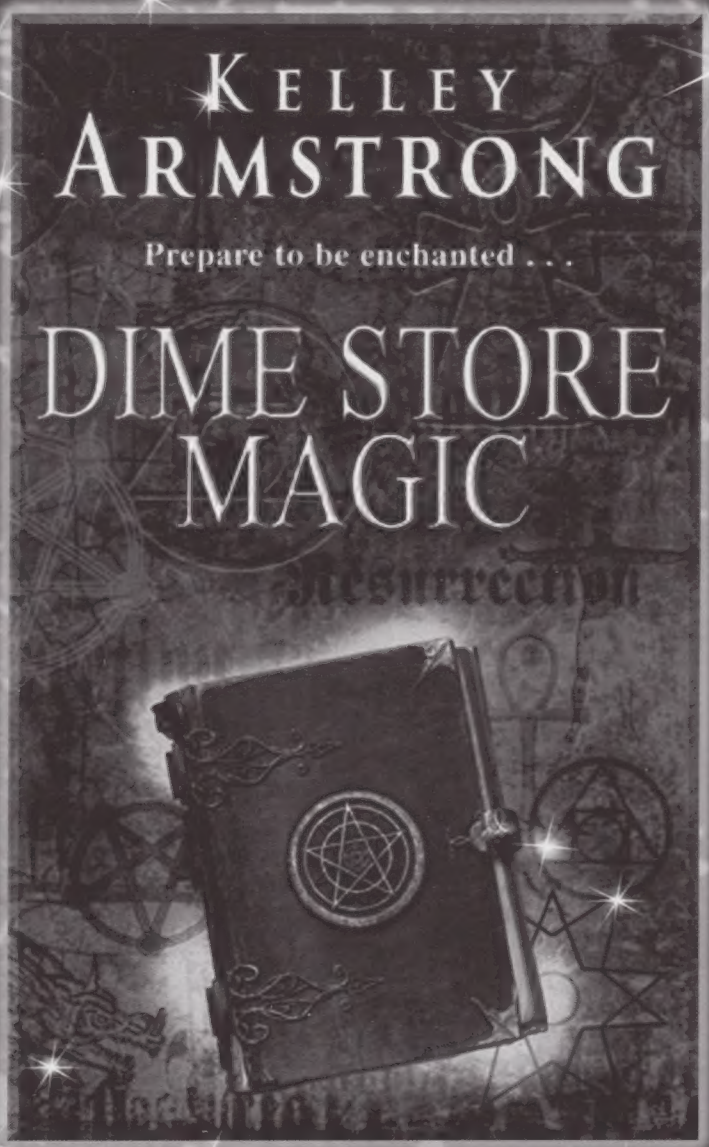

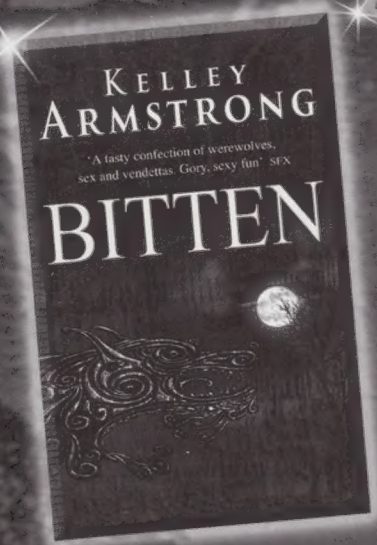

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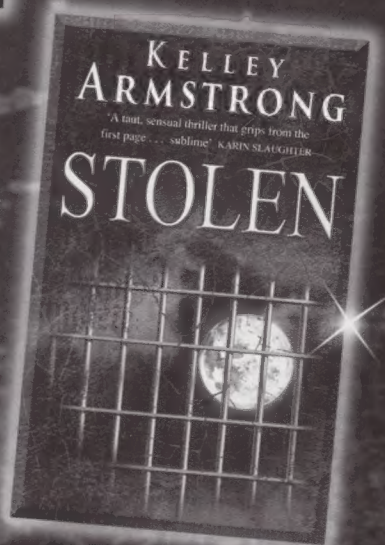

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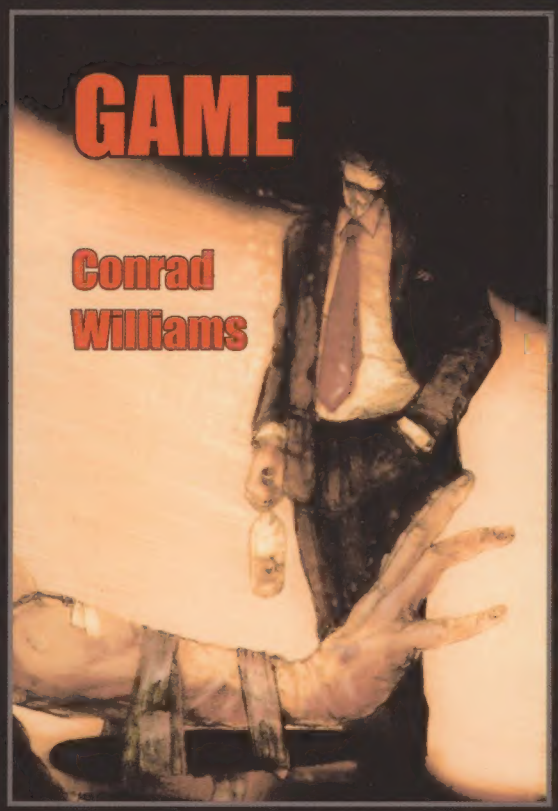

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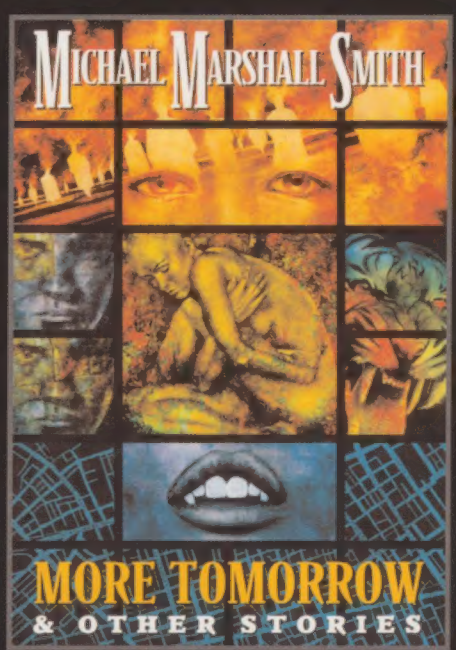

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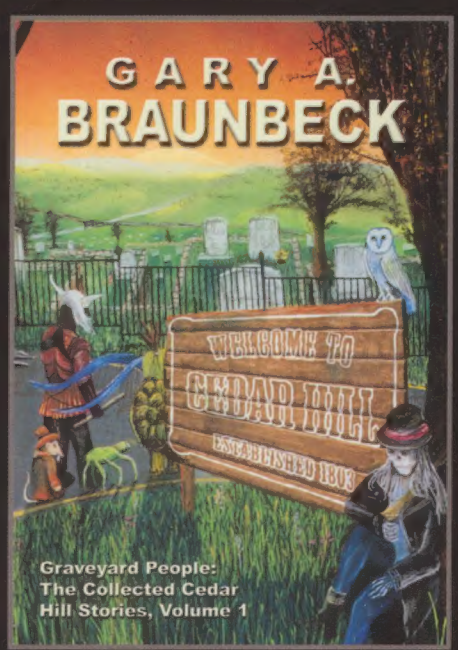

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